

OpenTheo

September 11th: 1 Kings 3 & Hebrews 2

September 10, 2020



Alastair Roberts

Solomon's wisdom. A little while lower than the angels.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

1 Kings 3. Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt. He took Pharaoh's daughter and brought her into the city of David until he had finished building his own house and the house of the Lord and the wall around Jerusalem. The people were sacrificing at the high places, however, because no house had yet been built for the name of the Lord.

Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father. Only he sacrificed and made offerings at the high places. And the king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the great high place.

Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night. And God said, Ask what I shall give you.

And Solomon said, You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my

father, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you. And you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne this day. And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child.

I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people? It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.

And God said to him, Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life, or riches, or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you, and none like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honour, so that no other king shall compare with you all your days.

And if you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days. And Solomon awoke, and behold, it was a dream. Then he came to Jerusalem, and stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and offered up burnt offerings and peace offerings, and made a feast for all his servants.

Then two prostitutes came to the king, and stood before him. The one woman said, O my Lord, this woman and I live in the same house, and I gave birth to a child while she was in the house. Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth, and we were alone.

There was no one else with us in the house, only we two were in the house. And this woman's son died in the night, because she lay on him. And she arose at midnight, and took my son from beside me, while your servant slept, and laid him at her breast, and laid her dead son at my breast.

When I rose in the morning to nurse my child, behold, he was dead. But when I looked at him closely in the morning, behold, he was not the child that I had born. But the other woman said, No, the living child is mine, and the dead child is yours.

The first said, No, the dead child is yours, and the living child is mine. Thus they spoke before the king. Then the king said, The one says, This is my son that is alive, and your son is dead.

And the other says, No, but your son is dead, and my son is the living one. And the king

said, Bring me a sword. So a sword was brought before the king.

And the king said, Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one, and half to the other. Then the woman whose son was alive said to the king, because her heart yearned for her son, O my lord, give her the living child, and by no means put him to death. But the other said, He shall be neither mine nor yours, divide him.

Then the king answered and said, Give the living child to the first woman, and by no means put him to death, she is his mother. And all Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered, and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice. The kingdom of Solomon is being established, rebellious elements have been pacified, and Solomon's power is now unrivaled.

Now we are seeing its rise to its full glory. The chapter begins with a marriage alliance with Egypt. Relations with Egypt had long been an important concern of geopolitics in the land of Canaan.

We must consider the strategic situation of the land between Egypt and Mesopotamia and their great powers. The region within which Israel was situated was often a realm where the leading kingdoms were like pawns of the back-rank powers that lay behind them. The various Egyptian dynasties, Assyria, Babylonia, the Medes, the Persians, the Greeks and others were the large empires and the state of affairs in Israel often depended upon relations with them.

The Philistines for instance formerly acted as vassals of Egypt in the region, maintaining the influence of Egypt over the area. Now Israel as a recent rising power in the region can play that role and also enjoy Egypt's protection. Reading the story of Israel we can often be unmindful of the great geopolitical concerns that lie behind its story.

Israel is a small fish in a larger pond, surrounded by many greater powers. This will become much more prominent of an issue later in Israel and Judah's history when certain of the large powers would overwhelm the land entirely. Much as Israel's temptation within the land would have been treaties and intermarriage with the Canaanites earlier on, given the fragility of their rootedness in it, the temptation of the king would have been marriage treaties with the surrounding nations.

An Egyptian queen would have been a particularly great international relations coup for Solomon. It was shrewd politics on Solomon's part. However political shrewdness has its limits, especially when people rest in it rather than trusting in the Lord.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and there are times when fearing the Lord might call people to forego the ways of the shrewd politician. As Israel rises as a kingdom their attention would naturally move beyond their borders. Where the internal fault lines had once occupied their concern, the international relations would now be

much more important to them.

However Israel needed to learn to trust the Lord with these too. Whether Solomon's taking of an Egyptian queen was an act of significant unbelief is not entirely clear. This chapter is very positive towards Solomon and most of what he does is characterised by faithfulness and wisdom.

However it does immediately raise warning signs for us and it also anticipates many of the ways that Solomon would actually turn away from the ways of the Lord in the future. Turning back to Egypt for weaponry, getting into entangling alliances with pagan peoples and serving the gods of his foreign wives all contributed to Solomon's later fall. His taking of an Egyptian wife could potentially have taken a more positive form however and perhaps at this point we are to believe that rather than sinning Solomon is taking an action that could go in one of a number of different directions but which necessitates considerable wisdom and care.

Lest we forget, Joseph, the great man of wisdom prior to Solomon, had also taken an Egyptian wife. The two great tribes of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, descended from an Egyptian matriarch. In that case Joseph had not abandoned the Lord for the ways of Egypt although it might have seemed likely at some points, especially after he had married an Egyptian woman from a powerful family and had children with her.

As we are told that Solomon loved the Lord, perhaps this is the better way to understand it. At the heart of this chapter is the story of Solomon's request for and receiving of the gift of wisdom. This episode is a contrast to much of the rest of the material of the book which focuses on public affairs.

This section however relates a dream that is of immense importance within the wider story of Solomon. It makes the source of Solomon's wisdom and wealth plain. They aren't merely the result of Solomon's personal efforts.

They come from the hand of the Lord who has blessed him. This is especially important to remember when we consider the aptness of wisdom for gaining power and wealth. If we didn't know the source of Solomon's wisdom, we might easily suppose that Solomon succeeds through his natural aptitudes.

Another thing to remember are that there are many ways that wisdom can fail. God grants Solomon wisdom but he also grants him success in his wise labours. The mere possession of wisdom is no guarantee and as we see in the book of Ecclesiastes, wisdom apart from the Lord's blessing can be attended with great frustration.

This is one of two great dreams that Solomon receives in the course of his reign. While prophets tend to receive visions, kings are often said to receive dreams. The second dream comes after the building of the temple.

Solomon receives this dream in Gibeon which was the great high place. After the capture of the ark, there had not been a single central high place. After the restoration of the ark, as David brought it into Jerusalem and placed it within his tent, the tabernacle was in Gibeon and the ark of the covenant in David's tent shrine in Jerusalem.

We discover the location of the tabernacle in 1 Chronicles chapter 16 verses 39-40. There were also various high places of worship throughout the land. This was contrary to the instruction of the Lord in Deuteronomy chapter 12 but it was a situation that existed on account of judgement upon the people.

One of Solomon's tasks as part of the building of the temple would be the centralisation of Israel's worship as the Lord intended. Solomon's dream is received after he sacrificed immense sacrifices on the bronze altar of the tabernacle at Gibeon. Solomon currently walks in the footsteps of his father David.

However, like Isaac as the son of Abraham, Solomon recognised that his father enjoyed an especial relationship with God which he did not yet enjoy in the same way. Genesis chapter 26 verses 2-5 describe the character of the Lord's blessing of Isaac on account of Abraham. Isaac has been blessed chiefly on account of the faithfulness of his father and Solomon is in a similar position which he expresses by speaking of the blessings that he is enjoying in a way that traces them back to the Lord's blessing of David his father.

Solomon however, finding himself in this situation of great blessing given to his father, a man of great spiritual stature, recognises how difficult it is to fill his father's shoes. He no longer has his father to counsel him as he had once counseled him concerning the establishment of his kingdom in chapter 2. Now he is on his own. He is faced with the immense responsibilities of ruling the Lord's people.

Unless he is equipped for the task and rises to sufficient spiritual stature himself, he will fail to maintain his father's legacy. Consequently, when the Lord asks Solomon what he desires, Solomon requests an understanding mind for the task that the Lord has given to him. He asks to discern between good and evil.

This request is a request for the knowledge of good and evil associated with the forbidden tree in the garden. Adam and Eve wanted to eat of that tree so that they might be like gods, like the angelic authorities in the heavens. The knowledge of good and evil is something that is enjoyed by the mature.

It is something that equips one to rule. The king needs wisdom and this knowledge of good and evil. It is reasonable to assume that the Lord had always desired for Adam and Eve to grow into enjoyment of the knowledge of good and evil, but that they had to learn how to serve before they would be granted the privilege of rule.

Now, however, the king is granted the knowledge of good and evil by the Lord. He will,

as Peter Lightheart notes, wake up from his deep sleep with Lady Wisdom by his side as a helper suitable for his task. He had his dream at Gibeon in the site of the temple and after his dream he goes up to Jerusalem to the tent where the Ark of the Covenant is.

David, after receiving the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel 7, had done something similar. He had gone in to sit before the Lord. In both cases this seems to be an indication of the Lord's exaltation of the person.

The Lord will elevate Solomon and Solomon has the real possibility of walking in the footsteps of David and enjoying immense blessings not merely for the sake of his father David, but also for his own sake. Solomon's wisdom is demonstrated in the episode that follows with the two prostitutes and the surviving child. David might have made a similar judgement between Mephibosheth and Zeba on his return to the land after the defeat of Absalom's coup.

Solomon exhibits insight into human nature in this judgement. He appreciates the importance of envy and rivalry in such situations. Indeed, the very moment that the true mother concedes the possession of the child to her rival, the false mother calls for the child to be chopped in two.

The false mother values dispossessing her rival of her child over both the child's life and her own possession of it. In Solomon's deep insight into human nature he shows that he can distinguish with shrewdness between good and evil in situations where it is far from obvious. Peter Lightheart suggests that there might be something more going on here too.

He observes the similarities with the story of the binding of Isaac and the staying of the knife that is about to kill the child. It is also a story with similarities to the story of the Exodus and the Passover with the death of the child at night. Beyond this, however, it might be a symbolic presentation of the story of the Kingdom as it will play out.

We find a similar symbolic story in chapter 13. There are two prostitutes, two unfaithful women corresponding to Israel and Judah. They both claim the seed for themselves but the Lord will finally remove the seed from the woman who cares more about defeating her rival than she does about the life of the seed.

A question to consider. Solomon feels keenly the challenge of walking in the footsteps of a man as great as his father. Many of us are called to follow in the footsteps of persons far greater than we feel that we are.

How can we learn from Solomon's example in this chapter? Hebrews chapter 2 Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a

great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders, and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to His will. For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking.

It has been testified somewhere, What is man that you are mindful of him, or the Son of man that you care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels. You have crowned him with glory and honour, putting everything in subjection under his feet. Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control.

At present we do not yet see everything in subjection to him, but we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honour, because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source.

That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, I will tell of your name to my brothers. In the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise. And again I will put my trust in him.

And again, behold, I and the children God has given me. Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham.

Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. Hebrews began with a grand presentation of the glory of Christ as the exalted and eternally supreme Son, far greater than any of the angels.

In chapter 2, however, the author turns to the questions of the appropriate response to this. If Christ indeed is far more than merely one of the heavenly beings, being God himself, then the manner of people's response to his work is a matter of so much greater significance. Seeing the faithful suffering of Jesus the Messiah is important.

However, without a robust account of the fact that Christ came from the heights of heaven, that he is the one through whom the creation was made and the one who is the unique Son of the Father, and the fact of his ascension over all other powers, the true significance of Christ's suffering simply will not be recognised. The author of Hebrews wants his hearers to be in no doubt as to the power and exaltation of Christ, and what this means. Christ isn't just another in the line of the martyrs, for instance.

He is the Lord of all. Knowledge of Christ's exalted power is not something that we can gain by sight. Although Christ's sufferings occurred in the realm of sight, knowing of his exaltation requires heeding the spoken message that has been delivered to us in the Gospel.

The greater revelation that we have received through the Eternal Son, a revelation that exceeds the revelation given through the prophets in past times, should lead us to pay much closer attention. It can be very easy to forget the exaltation of Christ in the situations of our lives, especially when we face resistance and persecution. However, once we have this reality clearly in our awareness, everything else takes on an added gravity.

The angels had been involved in delivering the message of the law at Sinai, a word that had been reliable and enforced with divine judgement. The message brought by the Eternal Son is of a far greater significance. It isn't a message merely delivered by emissaries, lesser messengers and various other intermediaries such as angels and prophets.

It is delivered by the Son in person. The message of the Son was then corroborated by the message of the apostles and other witnesses of his earthly ministry, who testified to its truth. Their message was confirmed by the accompanying witness of divinely given signs with their teaching.

Signs, wonders, miracles and gifts of the Spirit were part of the means by which the apostolic teaching was divinely confirmed. This seems to have been especially important in the foundational period of the Church's life. After churches were established and the New Testament scriptures completed and widely accessible, such signs, wonders and miracles seemed to become less prominent.

In verses 3-4 we see each of the persons of the Trinity as well, all involved in the work of witnessing to the message of the Gospel. First of all the Son declares the message in person, then the Father bears witness with signs and the gifts of the Spirit also testify. The author of Hebrew turns back to his treatment of the Son in relationship to the angels at this point.

The book began with the Son exalted above all of the angels. However now we will see the Son taking a position lower than the angels. Exploring the nature and the importance of the relationship between the Son's states of exaltation and his state of humiliation, the author will be able to strengthen his point.

The angels are exalted, but they are not going to rule the world to come. As the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6.3, do you not know that we are to judge angels? That privilege of rule belongs to humanity in the Messiah. He quotes Psalm 8 verses 3-6 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have

set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the Son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings, and crowned him with glory and honour.

You have given him dominion over the works of your hands. You have put all things under his feet. This great statement probably relates primarily to the Davidic King.

The Psalm is not about the exaltation of the generic human being, but of the representative man, the Davidic King of the people. It is about God establishing the King as his Son in the Davidic covenant and establishing his rule over all of his works through him. The reference of the quotation is to Christ.

Christ fulfils the meaning of Psalm 8. He was made lower than the angels for a period of time, but has now been exalted to the throne, everything placed in subjection under his feet. However, although Christ has been exalted in this way, it isn't visible to us yet. Not everything seems to be under his feet.

Indeed, the claim that Christ is the exalted Lord of all seems to go against all appearances. However, what we do see is Jesus. He is the one who was made lower than the angels.

He was seen and heard by many witnesses. We now also perceive by faith that he has won the victory through his death and is crowned with glory and honour. Visible appearances alone will be deceptive.

A fuller understanding of who Christ is and the nature of his work will make apparent the fact that he, as the one given by God for the purpose, enters into the reality of death and deals with it for everyone. Christ is the founder of our salvation. He is a great conquering hero who leads the way.

He goes before his people. He was the one who founded the world and now he has also founded our deliverance through his suffering. He brings many sons to glory and in so doing he pioneers the path that they will have to walk.

This is the appropriate way that things should be. The way of the Son is the way of the deliverance of the many sons. The Son is made perfect through suffering.

It is the means by which he attains to true maturity and the people of God will also be brought to their maturity in a similar manner. The Son fully enters into our condition so that in entering into his life we might be rescued from the power of death within it. Christ is one with humanity.

He does not just stand between God and humanity as a sort of intermediary being. He is fully divine and fully human. He is our brother and speaks of us as his brothers.

The quotation from Psalm 22 verse 22, I will tell of your name to my brothers in the midst of the congregation I will praise you, is from the most famous psalm speaking of the Messiah's suffering and victory. It is the principle psalm that is found on Jesus' lips on the cross. The gospel writers also allude to it on several occasions in their crucifixion accounts.

Like the verses that follow from Isaiah chapter 8 verse 17 and verse 18, they present the victorious Christ surrounded by the human beings he has delivered with himself as their champion, their chief, their forerunner and their redeemer. He sings in victory as one of them, leading them in song. He trusts in the Lord as one of them.

We will see later on that he is the author and the perfecter of faith. He presents them as people given to him by God as his children. From speaking of the Son chiefly as the hero and forerunner, the author moves to the Son as the deliverer.

The children given to him were under the dominion of the one with the power of death. So in order to deliver them from it, the Son entered into their condition. While the devil does not ultimately have the power to give or to take life of his own accord, death is destruction and the devil is the destroyer.

Death, even though introduced by God, is a means by which the devil can achieve his purposes. The thrall of any power also is generally wielded much more through fear than it is through direct coercional force. The power of death that keeps us in slavery is mostly the fear of death.

If people stop fearing the punishments of a king, that king will lose his power. Even if the punishments might still occur, people will far more readily rebel against him. Christ disarms the devil chiefly in his power of wielding fear.

By openly overcoming the finality of the power of death and destruction that the devil boasts in, that power ceases to terrify as it once did. Former prisoners can now rise up and people can be set free. Christ's identification with and deliverance of the prisoners and the hostages of death and the devil is exclusive to human beings.

Angels have not received such a salvation. The Son is also a high priest, in addition to being this hero and liberator. In order to be effective as such, he needs to be one of us, able truly to act as our representative.

Through his suffering he has experienced the extent of the human condition, so he is one to whom we can turn in our struggles. A question to consider. What are some examples of the ways in which the devil wields his power over us through the fear of death?