



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 26th November 2006
by Mark Ashton

10p

1 Kings 11:14-43

One last look at Solomon

(1) Making sense of Solomon – and looking through time into eternity (vv40-43)

Thirty-five years ago I came across this little bit of prose: ‘A man arranged bunches of flowers on a market stall and wondered how many he should sell for a pound. And another man passing, caught the gleam and the scent of them, and had a vision of an upland valley touched with gold, and April scattering desultory rains’ (T.W.H Gosland). How differently different people can view the same thing! And we have been struggling to agree on how we should view Solomon. Is he the ideal king of chapter 10, verses 23 to 24: *King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart?*

Or is he the violent avenger of his father’s enemies whom we saw back in chapter 2; the husband of an illegitimate foreign (Egyptian) wife of chapter 3; the betrayer of his people and his God in chapter 11 verses 1-7; and the king of a disaffected and unstable kingdom as we have just had read to us in the rest of chapter 11?

Will the real Solomon please stand up? What are we to make of him, as his reign ends? *As for the other events of Solomon’s reign—all he did and the wisdom he displayed—are they not written in the book of the annals of Solomon? Solomon reigned in Jerusalem over all Israel forty years. Then he rested with his fathers and was buried in the city of David his father. And Rehoboam his son succeeded him as king* (vv40-43).

I have suggested that we have to see both aspects of Solomon at once, if we are to view him as 1 Kings does. There *is* an ideal, a glimpse of real

glory, in him. Previously, I quoted Wordsworth—‘trailing clouds of glory do we come...’But there is also a flawed character and a failed ruler, whose kingdom disintegrated within a few months of his death. And it is not a simple progression, a moralistic tale, warning us not to lose our first love, not to be corrupted by wealth, power and sex as we get older. 1 Kings presents us with both aspects of Solomon at once. What we find in chapter 11 had been present since chapter 2, or even earlier—remember his own parents’ marriage was the result of lust, seduction, adultery and murder. We have got to see *both*.

I used this image to try to help us with this (Figure 1). We can see



Figure 1

there. And they are not the same. We’ve changed the colouring of the image this week, because, for the believer, evil is contained by this world. It is a this-world phenomenon. It will not last beyond death for us, it will not pursue us beyond the grave.

But, while we may only catch occasional glimpses and gleams of real goodness here and now, they are glimpses of eternity. They will last through death. They point us beyond time. The bad of Solomon was confined to this world (and we can learn moral lessons from it); but the ideal in Solomon tells us of God’s eternal purpose for creation. We are meant to look through time and into eternity. So I guess Solomon had to be marred, in order that you and I might look through and beyond him, to God’s ultimate king—Jesus.

The Bible keeps saying that to us—“look beyond

the here and now. This is not all there is. There is glory to come—only glimpsed now. But hang on to those glimpses, to those visions of the upland valley. Don't get entirely obsessed with how many bunches you should sell for a pound. Keep one eye on heaven."

So much for the bigger picture. Let's now consider the detail in chapter 11. So:

(2) Taking heed of our enemies – and seeing why they are let loose on us (v14-31)

Three are listed. There's (a) *Hadad: Then the Lord raised up against Solomon an adversary, Hadad the Edomite, from the royal line of Edom* (v14). While Hadad was still a boy, David's military exploits forced Hadad to take refuge in Egypt, where he was strangely well treated by a ruler who had already married his own daughter off to Solomon: *Pharaoh was so pleased with Hadad that he gave him a sister of his own wife, Queen Tahpenes, in marriage. The sister of Tahpenes bore him a son named Genubath, whom Tahpenes brought up in the royal palace. There Genubath lived with Pharaoh's own children. While he was in Egypt, Hadad heard that David rested with his fathers and that Joab the commander of the army was also dead. Then Hadad said to Pharaoh, "Let me go, that I may return to my own country." "What have you lacked here that you want to go back to your own country?" Pharaoh asked. "Nothing," Hadad replied, "but do let me go!"* (vv19-22).

Pharaoh's reluctance to release a known dissident back to his son-in-law's kingdom did not stop him doing so; and that shows what an unreliable ally he was for Solomon. Hadad was a destabilising influence in the south of the kingdom, and

(b) *Rezon* had the same effect in the north: *And God raised up against Solomon another adversary, Rezon son of Eliada, who had fled from his master, Hadadezer king of Zobah. He gathered men around him and became the leader of a band of rebels when David destroyed the forces of Zobah; the rebels went to Damascus, where they settled and took control. Rezon was Israel's adversary as long as Solomon lived, adding to the trouble caused by Hadad. So Rezon ruled in Aram and was hostile toward Israel* (vv23-25).

But the greatest threat to Solomon's rule arose within the kingdom itself: (c) *Jeroboam*—a name that was to echo down the pages of Israel's history as that of the arch-idolater: *Also, Jeroboam son of Nebat rebelled against the king. He was one of Solomon's officials, an Ephraimite from Zeredah, and his mother was a widow named Zeruah. Here is the account of how he rebelled against the king: Solomon had built the supporting terraces and had filled in the gap in the wall of the city of David his father. Now Jeroboam was a man of standing, and when Solomon saw how well the young man did his work, he put him in charge of the whole labour force of the house of Joseph. About that time Jeroboam was going out of Jerusalem, and Ahijah the prophet of Shiloh met him on the way, wearing a new cloak. The two of them were alone out in the country, and Ahijah took hold of the new cloak he was wearing and tore it into twelve pieces. Then he said to Jeroboam, "Take ten pieces for yourself, for this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'See, I am going to tear the kingdom out of Solomon's hand and give you ten tribes' "* (vv26-31).

Hadad and Rezon are described as Solomon's adversaries in verses 14 and 23. In Hebrew, the word is Satan, familiar to us as a term for the arch-enemy of God's people. The people of God cannot avoid opposition. The chronology of these rebellions is deliberately vague (it would appear that Hadad asked to return to Edom right at the beginning of Solomon's reign (verse 21)), because opposition is always there, from without and from within, in people and in circumstances, from those near to God's people and from those far from them, even from within our own hearts. We cannot avoid adversaries. Our arch-enemy, the devil, prowls round like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. If Solomon faced them, so will we. This is the nature of life for the believer.

Physically, we live in an environment alive with hostile organisms. We used to talk about microbes and germs. Now it's viruses and bacteria. But they seem to be equally bad news. And there is no Michael Jackson bubble we can live inside to avoid them. Nor is there spiritually.

In fact, we find Jesus in the middle of our problems, our suffering and our trials. Those very things that make it hard to trust God, that tempt us

to disbelieve in His love, force us to seek Him. The reality of evil—in this world and in my heart—brings home to me the reality of Christ: that I need a Saviour...that we all need a Saviour.

Did you notice that God raised up Solomon's opponents? *Then the Lord raised up against Solomon an adversary, Hadad the Edomite, from the royal line of Edom* (v14); *And God raised up against Solomon another adversary, Rezon son of Eliada, who had fled from his master, Hadadezer king of Zobah* (v23). And that is the point of Jeroboam's strange encounter with the prophet Ahijah: *Then he said to Jeroboam, "Take ten pieces for yourself, for this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'See, I am going to tear the kingdom out of Solomon's hand and give you ten tribes'"* (v31). These adversaries were under God's control to work out God's purposes. They were meant to bring Solomon to his senses, to humble him, and to cause him to throw himself on to God's mercy (just as opposition so frequently did in the life of David his father. Think of the Psalms).

Does it do that for you and me? When things go wrong, when people are against us, when faith is almost impossibly hard, do we ask ourselves: What does God mean me to learn in this? If we are believers, He is not punishing us. No, He did that to Jesus on the cross. Jesus has paid the penalty for my sins. I do not pay for them now. So when I suffer, it is not to atone for my guilt. It does not look backwards. It looks forwards—to teach me to walk God's way to heaven. It is part of His love for me, His fatherly discipline.

Forgive me for quoting again one of my favourite bits of not very good verse:

I walked a mile with pleasure
She chatted all the way
But I was none the wiser
For all she had to say
I walked a mile with sorrow
And never a word said she
But oh! the things I learned from her
When sorrow walked with me.

Finally, there is in this passage something more than just the assurance that, though we will certainly face adversaries, God controls them for our good. I've called it:

(3) Knowing that God's choice will trump our choices – and trusting God even when He rips His people apart. (v32-39)

But for the sake of my servant David and the city of Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, he will have one tribe. I will do this because they have forsaken Me and worshiped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh the god of the Moabites, and Molech the god of the Ammonites, and have not walked in My ways, nor done what is right in My eyes, nor kept My statutes and laws as David, Solomon's father, did. But I will not take the whole kingdom out of Solomon's hand; I have made him ruler all the days of his life for the sake of David My servant, whom I chose and who observed My commands and statutes. I will take the kingdom from his son's hands and give you ten tribes. I will give one tribe to his son so that David My servant may always have a lamp before Me in Jerusalem, the city where I chose to put My Name. However, as for you, I will take you, and you will rule over all that your heart desires; you will be king over Israel. If you do whatever I command you and walk in My ways and do what is right in My eyes by keeping My statutes and commands, as David My servant did, I will be with you. I will build you a dynasty as enduring as the one I built for David and will give Israel to you. I will humble David's descendants because of this, but not forever (vv32-39).

We can see our choices, the choices of the human race, summarised for us in verse 33: *I will do this because they have forsaken Me and worshiped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh the god of the Moabites, and Molech the god of the Ammonites, and have not walked in My ways, nor done what is right in My eyes, nor kept My statutes and laws as David, Solomon's father, did.* Rather than live according to the moral standards our loving Creator has set for us, we prefer to pursue self-reliance and self-righteousness, pleasure and relationships, prosperity and achievement, or whatever other gods or goddesses we set our hearts upon. And the logic is clear: if humans reject God, God respects their choices and allows them to face the consequence of those choices: *"I am going to tear the kingdom out of Solomon's hand"* (v31b).

But against Solomon's choice and the people's choice (note that **'they have forsaken'** in v33) to

forsake God, we read that God too is exercising choice: ***But for the sake of My servant David and the city of Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, he will have one tribe (v32), But I will not take the whole kingdom out of Solomon's hand; I have made him ruler all the days of his life for the sake of David My servant, whom I chose and who observed my commands and statutes (v34), I will give one tribe to his son so that David my servant may always have a lamp before me in Jerusalem, the city where I chose to put my Name (v36).***

So there is not, after all an impersonal law of cause and effect. We are not locked into a deterministic universe, controlled by karma. It is a universe ruled by a personal God. My fate is not governed by the sum total of my own choices, as though my will was the only will that mattered. There is another will, another personality, involved. And it is His will which ultimately matters. God's choice will trump men's choices. You know that moment in a game of Bridge when the final player unexpectedly produces a trump to win the hand? One of the players thought they were winning, until that last card was played. God's will is like that. When He plays His hand, it trumps all our contributions, whether they are for good or for ill.

And that is why the Christian faith has taken a unique attitude to suffering in our world. Despite the huge weight of human pain, it refuses to be trapped by fatalism: it has been said that, to a man trapped and sinking in a quicksand, the Muslim might say "Alas! It is the will of Allah!"; the Hindu might say, "Never mind—you will be reincarnated and return to earth in another form"; the Buddhist might say, "Let that life be a lesson to the rest of the world"; the Confucian might say, "There is evidence that men should stay out of such places." But the Christian has to say, "Brother, give me your hand, and I will try to pull you out".

We have to engage, to get involved, to make sacrifices for others, because we know that the will of a loving God rules this universe. Human suffering needs to look forward and not backward, because we are dealing with a person, not mere causality.

Do you see the last four words of verse 39? ***I will humble David's descendants because of this, but not for ever.*** It is one of those little glimpses,

beyond the place and the time of Ahijah's prophecy, into the eternal purposes of God. It is said, isn't it? that a wife can tell her husband that he has had one drink too many with a single glance across a crowded cocktail party. We know that sort of communication by a single look, don't we? Whether it's rebuke, or tenderness, or recognition, or dismay. Those four words at the end of verse 39 are like a glance from God, telling us that we can trust Him: ***"I will humble David's descendants because of this, but not for ever"***

You see, God was tearing His own kingdom to bits just when it seemed to be reaching its earthly zenith. Solomon's reign promised so much. We saw glimpses, visions of glory in all that wealth and wisdom. But there were cracks—cracks in Solomon's heart, as he married foreign women and worshipped foreign gods, and cracks in the kingdom, as they followed where their leader led them. Decline and disaster were inevitable.

But neither the gleams of glory in Solomon nor the awful predictability of sin and judgement for his kingdom, provide the whole picture. Behind them both stood God, Who had greater plans than these for our salvation, a greater King than Solomon to be our ruler. Our hope lies in Him—that He knows what He is doing, even when He tears His people apart. So find his word for you, and trust it, hold on to it. He will not break it.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)