

## ***The Responsibility Of Blessings***

1 Kings 3:3-14

July 31, 2011

### **I.**

This is the third consecutive week the Gospel reading has been about the kingdom of heaven. And while it's good to preach about the kingdom, today I would like to talk about our Old Testament reading because this story of one man, King Solomon, foreshadows how the biblical history of the Hebrew people guides us today in knowing the importance of doing God's will.

Let's start with a story. Once upon a time a handsome young prince became king of a very powerful nation. And God was pleased with him, and asked what gift he could give to the young king as he began his reign. The young king could have asked for wealth or power, but instead asked for wisdom to rule the people righteously, and God was even more pleased.

And so God gave him wisdom greater than anyone ever had or would have. In addition, God showed his favor by granting the young king riches and glory beyond that of any other king, even though the king did not ask for them. And they all lived happily ever after. The End.

Or was it the end? Was there more? Listen to these words from the Bible. "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What do people gain by all the toil at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes. The sun rises and the sun goes down. All things are wearisome."

Then the speaker continues, "When [I was] king over Israel in Jerusalem, I applied my mind to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a chasing after the wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun." (Ecc. 1:2-17, 2:11 *excerpts*).

Those are quite contrasting images, aren't they? Today's reading from First Kings describes young Solomon as he took the throne of Israel after the death of his father, David. And if we only listen to the part about how God granted Solomon's request for wisdom and gave him riches and glory, we might think that Solomon had it made.

But, alas, it was not to be. Solomon's future did not unfold as he had hoped. Those expressions of gloom and despair about vanity and chasing after the wind I just read were Solomon's own words from the later Book of Ecclesiastes, which described the final years of his life.

So, what happened in between? How did a young king get off to such a great start and end up thinking life was vanity and meaningless? The short answer is that he forgot about God.

### **II.**

At this point I ask us to use our imaginations. Imagine you are fifteen years old, and your father promises to buy you a car. And he does. Then he promises that if you obey and do as he says, he will let you drive it. But if you don't, he will take the keys away and park it in the garage. Then assume time passes, you go to college, and your younger brother or sister inherits the car.

Keeping that imaginary story in mind, let's consider some Hebrew history. About 900 years before Solomon's time, God made a promise to Solomon's ancestor, Abraham. God said the Hebrews would become as numerous as the stars, and would be given the holy land as an everlasting possession (Ge. 12:1-3, 15:5, 17:8). This was like your father promising to buy your car.

And God followed through. About 500 years before Solomon's time God enabled Moses to lead a great multitude of Hebrews right up to the border of the promised land. This was like your father bringing home your new car to fulfill his promise.

But then God made another promise, this time to Moses. God said if the people obeyed the law they could enter the land and prosper and be blessed. But if they were disobedient they would lose the land, and be cursed and scattered among the nations (Deut. 28). This is like what your father said about behaving or else he would take the car keys away.

For the next few centuries the Hebrews occupied the land, but began to worship other gods contrary to God's covenant with Moses. God punished them by raising up military forces from neighboring countries. When they repented they were restored, but then they did it again. This would be like your father taking the car keys, giving them back, taking them again, and so on.

And so there was a cycle of Hebrew disobedience, punishment, and forgiveness, and then disobedience again. But God was patient, and did not remove them from the land, yet. The people, however, grew weary of being insecure, and did not trust God to protect them. This led to creation of the monarchy and the beginning of the Kings of Israel.

About 1000 BC, Solomon's father, David, became king and consolidated the territories of the holy land into one large powerful nation of Israel. Israel continued as a dominant force in the region throughout David's life and the life of his son, Solomon. During this time Israel prospered beyond anyone's expectations. To this day, movies are made about King Solomon's gold.

But, during the end of his reign, Solomon turned away from God. Then he died and everything fell apart. A civil war divided the once powerful nation of Israel into two second-rate countries, north and south. Over the succeeding centuries, all kings in the north did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and most kings in the south did the same.

Within about three hundred years after Solomon's death, both nations had been conquered by pagan neighbors, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, and the people were exiled. Except for a brief period between the Old and New Testaments, the Jewish people had no country until the modern state of Israel was formed in 1948. God's judgment had come to pass.

### **III.**

So let's go to the actual reading and see how it parallels the "once upon a time" version we heard earlier. When Solomon became king, God asked what he wanted. Solomon could have had anything, but he asked for wisdom. God was pleased and granted it, and even granted things that Solomon did not request. God also gave Solomon riches and honor.

For about twenty years Solomon did well. He was obedient, Israel prospered, and Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem as the center of worship. But God wanted to speak to Solomon again.

And here we'll go back to our imaginary youthful story. Assume that when you left for college and your younger brother or sister took the car, he or she had not been involved in your father's original instructions to you. And so your father had to explain the same things to your brother or sister he said to you. Obey me and do what I say, or I will take the keys to the car and park it.

That same situation applied to Solomon. He was not around when God spoke to Abraham and Moses. So God came to Solomon again, and reaffirmed his words to Moses. He said if Solomon did not keep God's commands and decrees, he would cut off Israel from the land (1 Ki. 9:7).

And it was not long before God became displeased because Solomon had taken seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, many of whom were not Jews. And he not only set up shrines so they could worship their own pagan gods right there in Jerusalem, but he also joined them in their idolatry (1 Ki. 11:3-8). He threw the first commandment out the window.

So God appeared to Solomon a third time, this time with bad news. God said "since you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, I will tear the kingdom away from you. Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son" (1 Ki. 11-12).

The rest is the history I mentioned earlier. Within about three hundred fifty years the nation was completely gone and the people were in exile. It would be like your father finally taking the keys away from your younger brother or sister, and selling the car.

And Solomon had several years to think about God's displeasure before he died. Solomon realized what was coming, that he was responsible, and nothing could change it. This explains his words of despair in the Book of Ecclesiastes we heard at the beginning of this sermon. Power and glory had become vanity and chasing after the wind.

#### **IV.**

What does this lengthy story mean for us? It speaks about wisdom, but not the worldly wisdom of insight and understanding that comes from experience, or hard knocks, or sage advice from our elders, or the lessons of life. Even atheists can have that kind of wisdom.

Godly wisdom, however, is different because it comes from God. It is a gift that leads to faith and obedience to God's will rather than knowing clever ways of dealing with the world. God's wisdom leads us to strengthen our relationship with him, and place him first in our lives.

Think about this. What if God said he would grant you one wish? What would it be? Would you wish for money, possessions, power, or things for yourself? Or instead would you wish for world peace, a cure for cancer, an end to poverty, or things that would serve society?

Perhaps, being Episcopalians who at times seek the middle way, we might do both. We might ask for something to help ourselves and the world. In a way, that's what Solomon did. He asked God to help him solve a problem. He asked God for the ability to govern his unruly people.

And Solomon was blessed, for a while, because he did what was good and right. In the first part of his rule as King of Israel he trusted in God. He honored God and God honored him. But in the end, he turned away from God with disastrous consequences.

#### **V.**

This is the teaching of today's lesson. God is generous and merciful, and will provide for us. But it's not a one way street. God wants something in return. He wants us, as he wanted Solomon, to be obedient to his will. And it's not a deal we make, but rather a response from our hearts to the blessings that God, in his grace, has given to us.

But we all know that it's not easy. Sometimes we find that to do things God's way we have to put things at the top of our lists that, in other circumstances, might be closer to the bottom. We say, "I'll do it later." God says. "Do it now."

And we also know God is in the world through the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit we discern and do God's will. Sometimes we receive guidance through prayer and Scripture. Sometimes it comes as an inspiration. And sometimes it does not come at all. Perhaps in those cases we are not seeking God's agenda for us, but rather God's endorsement of our own agendas.

But nothing really has changed in three thousand years. From God's covenant with Moses to the New Covenant given by Jesus Christ, a common thread runs through the relationship between God and his people. It is that when we are obedient he will provide. When we try to do what God wants us to do he will, through his grace, give us the gifts that we need. *Amen.*