

The Enigmatic Life and Times of King Solomon

One of the most fascinating careers in all history was that of the great King Solomon, who reigned 40 years over Israel during its period of greatest influence, approximately from 971 to 931 B.C. This included a brief period when God’s ancient promise to Abraham (Gen. 15:18) concerning the geographical extent of his promised land was precursively fulfilled (1 Kings 8:65), going all the way from “the river of Egypt” to the Euphrates in northern Syria.

The influence of Solomon, however, extended far beyond the boundaries of his kingdom. According to the biblical record, Solomon was “wiser than all men . . . and his fame was in all nations round about” (1 Kings 4:31). “And there came of all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth, which had heard of his wisdom” (1 Kings 4:34).

Furthermore, his reign was uniquely prosperous. “King Solomon passed all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom” (2 Chron. 9:22). And finally his reign was one of peace. Whereas his father, King David, had to fight many wars — even the civil war led by his son Absalom — Solomon “had peace on all sides round about him” (1 Kings 4:24), at least during most of his reign. He built the great temple in Jerusalem, as well as many other large construction projects.

All of these blessings had come from God, and Solomon was aware of this. For a long time, “Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father” (1 Kings 3:3).

Yet Solomon, blessed beyond measure in every way by his God, later “loved many strange [that is ‘foreign’] women,” eventually acquiring “seven

hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart” (1 Kings 11:1–3). He even built shrines for all their pagan gods, thus introducing many false religions into the very center of Israel, flagrantly disobeying the specific commandments of the Lord who had blessed him so much.

But amazingly, in spite of all this, God used him to write three wonderful books of His inspired Scriptures — that is, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. These books are very different from any other books of the Bible, and quite different from each other, yet still are undoubtedly part of the divine canon of Scripture. Each is unique, with a uniquely vital message and with great blessing to the thoughtful reader.

All other Bible books were written by holy men of God, true to the Lord throughout their lives — men like Moses, Paul, John, the prophets and apostles. So we wonder how God could use an apparently apostate king like Solomon to write three of His inspired books — at least one of which (Ecclesiastes) was certainly written near the end of his life.

Did Solomon repent and return to the Lord? If so, why does the biblical record not say so? This is the enigma of Solomon. We need to look carefully at the records, reading both the lines and between the lines, as well as we are able.

We must do this with full confidence in the absolute inerrancy and perspicuity of these divinely inspired records and writings of Solomon, for that is certainly the way in which Christ and the apostles viewed all the Old Testament Scriptures, including these three books written or compiled by Solomon. And we shall find, as many before us have found, that there is rich blessing for us in each of them.

Solomon’s Background and Early Life

First of all, we need to look as closely as the evidence allows at the circumstances of Solomon’s birth and early life, before he became king of Israel. In doing this, we are limited almost entirely to the records in the Bible, since there are no extra-biblical writings of the time available, or any archaeological artifacts that even mention his name.

However, the Lord Jesus referred to him on two occasions, both of which speak of him in a positive light, not mentioning his apostate years at all. One was in a passing reference to him in relation to our anxieties about suitable clothing. “And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these” (Matt. 6:28–29).

The other was in the context of a rebuke to the scribes and Pharisees for rejecting His teachings. “The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for she came from the uttermost

part of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here” (Matt. 12:42).

Solomon’s mother was a beautiful woman named Bathsheba, whom David had loved so much that he had committed adultery with her, then arranged for her Hittite husband to be in lethal danger in battle so that he could take her for his own wife. Presumably, Bathsheba also loved David, although it might have been almost impossible to refuse the great king’s invitation even if she had wanted to.

The story of David and Bathsheba is one of the most familiar narratives in the Old Testament, so it need not be repeated here. After Uriah was slain in battle and Bathsheba spent the necessary time in mourning, “David sent and fetched her to his house, and she became his wife, and bare him a son” (2 Sam. 11:27).

David already had at least six wives (Ahinoam, Abigail, Maachah, Haggith, Abital, and Eglah — 1 Chron. 3:1–3) in addition to Saul’s daughter Michal (1 Sam. 18:27), and probably others as well. Nevertheless, David desired Bathsheba so much that he was willing to disobey at least three of God’s basic ten commandments (those against covetousness, adultery, and murder) in order to have her.

And, of course, “the thing that David had done displeased the LORD” (2 Sam. 11:27), and the prophet Nathan was sent by the Lord to rebuke him, saying he had “despised the commandment of the LORD.” David had always been very committed to the Lord and His Word, despite this and other sins of the flesh into which he had fallen, as evidenced in so many of his psalms.

Nathan’s rebuke, therefore, brought him under deep conviction and then to repentance and eventual restoration. Psalms 32 and 51 memorialize this traumatic event in his life, and God continued to bless and use him. Nevertheless, despite David’s fasting and intensive prayer, God allowed his illegitimate son to die.

The timeless lesson from this tragic event is that sin does have consequences, even when it is confessed and forgiven. Another valuable insight from the death of this child, however, is that infants who die before they have become conscious sinners are safe in heaven. “I shall go to him,” David said, after the child’s death, “but he shall not return to me” (2 Sam. 12:23).

But what has all this to do with Solomon? In God’s inscrutable providence, Solomon was the next son of David and Bathsheba, and God chose him to be David’s successor as king of Israel. Bathsheba, of course, had also grieved over the loss of her child, but “David comforted Bathsheba his wife, and went in unto her, and lay with her: and she bare a son, and he called his name Solomon: and the LORD loved him” (2 Sam. 12:24).

David already had many sons and would yet have others (19 are named in 1 Chron. 3:1–9), and it may seem strange that God would choose the son of Bathsheba, who had committed adultery with David, to be the king. Under the law, an adulterous wife was supposed to be executed by stoning (John 8:4–5; see Lev. 20:10), and so was the man involved. But David had been forgiven, and it had been he who initiated the liaison; in fact, in all probability, Bathsheba felt she had no choice but to submit to the great king. She almost certainly was also repentant, especially after she learned of David’s sorrow and then the death of her son.

Whatever the reason, God chose to bless her then with a son who would be the next king. The fact that this was God’s choice and not David’s only was later clearly confirmed by David: “And of all my sons, (for the LORD hath given me many sons,) he hath chosen Solomon my son to sit upon the throne of the kingdom of the LORD over Israel” (1 Chron. 28:5).

David spoke these words to all the leaders of Israel at the time he told them also of his plans to build a temple in Jerusalem for the worship of God. He had previously given the same testimony to Solomon: “And David said to Solomon, My son . . . the word of the LORD came to me, saying . . . Behold, a son shall be born to thee, who shall be a man of rest from all his enemies round about: for his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quietness unto Israel in his days. He shall build an house for my name; and he shall be my son, and I will be his father; and I will establish the throne of his kingdom over Israel for ever” (1 Chron. 22:7–10).

God had, therefore, even chosen Solomon’s name before he was born, a name which means “peaceful.” Actually, when Solomon was born, God also gave him another name as well. “And He sent by the hand of Nathan the prophet; and he called his name Jedidiah, because of the LORD” (2 Sam. 12:25). Jedidiah means “beloved of the LORD.” Both names were highly appropriate, at least at the time, indicating clearly God’s love of Solomon and His great purpose for him.

Considering Bathsheba’s background, this was surely an act of loving grace on God’s part. An adulterous wife was chosen to be the mother of the great King Solomon!

But there were other factors involved as well — Bathsheba’s first husband, Uriah, was a Hittite, from one of the pagan tribes that had been in the land of Canaan since before the days of Abraham. Possibly so was Bathsheba, but both had been somehow won to faith in the true God, and Uriah was even in David’s army, as one of his 37 special “mighty men” (2 Sam. 23:8, 39).

Bathsheba was a beautiful woman — evidently beautiful in heart as well as appearance, and she had undoubtedly come to love David dearly, as well as her first son, now with the Lord, and then Solomon. David must certainly have told her of the Lord’s great plans for Solomon, assuring her that he

would sit on the throne as David's successor when the time came for him to die. The time eventually did come when she would have to remind David of that promise (1 Kings 1:11–17).

But first we should learn what we can about Solomon's childhood and youth, and how his parents (and the Lord) had prepared him to assume that high calling. The narrative itself does not tell us much, but we can read between the lines, as it were, and also study Solomon's own reminiscences in his own later writings.

One of these notable writings, of course, is the Book of Proverbs. It is uncertain whether Solomon wrote the first nine chapters or David wrote them for Solomon's instruction. Assuming Solomon was the author (as most conservative scholars believe), then one passage is especially significant in this connection. "For I was my father's son," wrote Solomon, "tender and only beloved in the sight of my mother. He taught me also, and said unto me, Let thine heart retain my words: keep my commandments, and live. Get wisdom, get understanding: forget it not; neither decline from the words of my mouth. Forsake her not, and she shall preserve thee: love her, and she shall keep thee. Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding" (Prov. 4:3–7).

Evidently both David and Bathsheba were diligent in teaching young Solomon, and David especially emphasized the importance of seeking true wisdom in his understanding of the world and its people. Much of Solomon's own writings in the Book of Proverbs no doubt reflected his father's teaching, as well as the divinely inspired wisdom in his father's many psalms. This influence surely was behind Solomon's reply to God when he was asked what he desired from God most of all. His reply to God was this: "Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people" (1 Kings 3:9). This choice pleased the Lord, and He not only gave Solomon his request but much more besides.

David's instruction of his son must have included, in addition to his counsel about dealing with women and people in general, much also about the world of nature. David himself had spent his youth as a shepherd, out in the fields and forests of his country, and also had written much about God's creation and about history in his psalms. He loved the streams and meadows, the sky and stars, the birds and beasts, the sea and the mountains, and wrote often about these in his psalms.

Although the record never mentions it directly, it is reasonable to believe that Solomon was also encouraged to spend much time in studying nature. He probably was provided the best teachers available as pedagogues to help him in these studies. He also must have spent time in traveling around his father's kingdom, learning to know the land and its people as well as its plants and