

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON AND THE FOOLISHNESS OF THE CROSS

1 Kings 3:5-12

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Analysis by Chris Repp

At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." 6And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, 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 today. 7And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. 8And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. 9Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?" 10It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. 11God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, 12I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you.

Author's note: I find it impossible to consider this pericope apart from the whole of the Solomon story, which as we know ends

badly. I also find that I need to draw upon 1 Corinthians 1 to bring the gospel out of this text.

DIAGNOSIS: Bad Self-Diagnosis: “Ask Your Doctor If Wisdom Is Right for You”

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Wise

Solomon, newly ascended to the throne of Israel, whose reign was recently secured by putting his scheming older brother to death, and by the help of the prophet Nathan, Zadok the priest, and his mother, Bathsheba, is now confronted by God in a dream and told to ask what he wants of God. The Sunday School version of the story as I learned it is that Solomon gave the right answer in asking for wisdom so that he would be able to rule God's people. And that's what made Solomon a good king, a hero of the Bible. But of course that's not the whole story. Solomon's "understanding mind," which God gave to him in abundance, together with the riches and long life that he did not ask for, indeed helped him to rule over God's people. But it was a rule that was patterned after the ways of this world. Let us recall that God did not want the people of Israel to have a king like other nations, and warned them how things would turn out if they did (see 1 Samuel 8). For that indeed is just how things turned out. Solomon asked for what was needed to rule in a worldly way, not for what was needed to advance God's intentions for the chosen people.

And isn't this true of us too? Don't we aspire to worldly success, and the means to achieve it, even though it runs counter to God's good intentions for us and the world God so loves?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Unfaithful*

But really you have to wonder even about the extent of Solomon's wisdom. He recognized the virtues of his father David that endeared him to God, namely faithfulness, righteousness, and uprightness, and yet he did not ask for these. He asked for wisdom, which made him a rock star in his corner of the ancient world. He lived an extravagant, worldly life. He built God a lavish house, and himself one that was even more so. He impressed the world with his wisdom in all sorts of areas. And what would a rock star's life be without lots of women – 700 wives and 300 concubines? Their favors were returned in worship places for their gods. Solomon's wisdom did not make him faithful like his father. (Why exactly do we like his Proverbs so much?) In spite of his wisdom, his heart was turned away from God.

And what does our worldly success, when we achieve it, do to our hearts?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *God's Heart Turned Away*

The problem goes still deeper. Not only does Solomon turn away from God, but God turns away from Solomon. God has become Solomon's enemy by 1 Kings 11, and raises up adversaries to him. The injustices done to other nations in the past are now visited upon Solomon and the Israelites. Not only that, but God now promises to take the kingdom from Solomon's house. After Solomon's death, the kingdom will be divided, and even worse things lay in the future for God's people.

And then there's you and me. Have we not also made God our enemy by our unfaithfulness and our pursuit of worldly success? What evil awaits us as a result?

PROGNOSIS: Steadfast Love

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God's Heart Turned Toward Us*

The answer to both Solomon's unfaithfulness and ours, as Solomon rightly discerned (even before he received God's gift of wisdom!), is nothing less than the faithfulness of God. Even as God is stripping away the kingdom from Solomon's descendants, God also promises one day to restore the kingdom to God's people. It will be God's own Son, Jesus Christ who will fulfill this promise, who will turn the Father's heart to us in the most unworldly way, through his death and resurrection.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Faithful*

God's faithfulness and forgiveness toward us, in spite of our unfaithfulness heals not only the rift between us and God, but heals our own wayward hearts. Our reconciliation with God lures us away from the idolatries of this world to cast our lot with the kingdom that God is even now bringing to fruition, even as the kingdoms of this world go the way of all flesh.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Foolish*

Wisdom, it turns out, is not all it's cracked up to be. For this reason Paul quotes God, speaking through Isaiah, as he writes his first letter to the Corinthians, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." The message of the gospel, of God's reconciling love in the death and resurrection of Jesus, is rank foolishness by the standards of this world. But that foolishness, extravagantly expressed by us in acts of love and forgiveness, is the power and the wisdom of God for us and it is our salvation.