

Solomon's Conflicted View of Wisdom

The section of the Bible generally called “wisdom literature” by theologians is Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. In each of these the characters and/or author seems to put a very high priority on wisdom, and living a righteous life. We see the value of living the righteous life in Job, but in life there are no guarantees because trouble may come at any time, and when it does, the Lord who gave you everything just may take it away for reasons you can't comprehend. In Proverbs, we learn that for the most skillful living, what is best is what is wisest. Generally if you are a good parent you will turn out good children. If you have a good “God fearing” spouse, you will generally have a good marriage. This is the wisest course, and so it is usually the best course, but there are no guarantees.

Where Proverbs seems to have life figured out, Ecclesiastes depicts a world where none of the Proverbs work out in the end. Proverbs exalts wisdom, but Ecclesiastes says, “with much wisdom comes much sorrow, the more knowledge, the more grief.” Wait a minute, I thought Solomon wrote both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes? It is very much like Psalm 22 and 23 which were both written by David. They were written during two different periods of time. Sometimes our experience in life is like the trials of Job (Psalm 22), and sometimes it is peaceful and seems successful like Psalm 23, “I shall not want”. Sometimes the world works according to the principles of wisdom in Proverbs, and sometimes we experience the contradictions of Ecclesiastes 1:18, “in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain.”

Keep in mind that Solomon's reign as King of Israel was the Golden Age of Israel. Therefore the Book of Ecclesiastes exudes meaninglessness and futility in an age of peace and prosperity never reached before or after. The reality of Solomon's life was that more freedoms, more knowledge, more money, more pleasures, and more fame only brought more frustration and disappointment. Solomon was very frustrated that his wealth, wisdom, and pleasures were short lived, and his fate was the same as all poor, dumb, and deprived men. Not only that, but he found no ultimate meaning and purpose in any of his vast accomplishments. Solomon ended up discovering at the end of his life the same points that Job did—we can't make sense out of life on our own. As the author of Hebrews 1:1-3 tells us, knowledge about ultimate reality and eternal life comes only from God, or as Paul wrote, “How unsearchable are God's judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the

mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? For from Him and through Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever.”(Rom.11:33-36)

Solomon

Solomon was the son of King David and his wife Bathsheba. He was born into great privilege. He was one of many sons of David, all wishing to be king after David. The ambition was intensified because they all had different mothers, and each wife was ambitious for her son to sit on the throne. The intrigue intensified as David grew older. Finally, in a scene right out of *The Godfather*, David and Solomon mapped out Solomon’s course of action to take after David died. Basically all enemies and rivals had to be wiped out. When Solomon took over the expectations of the people along with his personal ambitions were huge. He was the one who would unite Israel, and bring it to its fullest glory. David had been successful, but Israel still had many enemies from within and from without. Israel’s borders were no where near what God had promised Abraham, and Solomon was determined to enlarge those borders and bring peace and prosperity to Israel.

David had desired to build a permanent Temple to worship God which would replace the Tabernacle. David had gone so far as to buy the land and much of the materials, but it would be known as Solomon’s Temple. Solomon also envisioned a great palace along with many monuments, buildings, lakes, parks, highways, and new cities. These were not vain “pie in the sky” ambitions because Solomon became the most capable leader that ever lived. The Bible tells us of his many talents of intelligence, wisdom, an author, poet, musician, negotiator, businessman, and possibly the greatest ladies man ever. Every king’s daughter wanted Solomon. One of the great stories about Solomon involved the Queen of Sheba. She had heard all the stories about his fame, but she desired to see for herself. She travelled 1200 miles to check him out. The story goes that she was pretty “hot” herself, along with being very wealthy. In 1 Kings 10:5, she was so impressed that “there was no more spirit in her.” I’m not sure exactly what that means, but it sounds like he had the “upper hand”. She told him that he was twice as impressive as even the reports about him. She unloaded a huge amount of gold and precious stones on him as a gift. The story ends with an interesting comment in verse 13, “King Solomon gave to the Queen of Sheba all her desires which she requested”. This sounds X rated to me, and would make for a good Hollywood movie.

1 Kings 10 goes on to summarize Solomon’s typical income, along with his amassed wealth.

His annual revenue of gold alone was about 50,000 pounds. That is about a billion dollars at today's prices. He was the richest man in the world. In fact, he was everything any ambitious man has ever desired to be. He had greater fame, more possessions, more respect, more power, more talent, accomplishments, and experiences than anyone ever has had. He had it all, and he did it all. I challenge you to think of anything you have ever wanted to own, anything you have ever wanted to be, anything you have ever wanted to do—Solomon had it and did it.

The Wisdom of Solomon

At the very beginning of his reign as king, in 1 Kings 3:5, God appeared to Solomon and said, "Ask what you wish me to give you." Solomon responded in great humility that the job given him was huge, and the responsibility great, so what he needed most was discernment and wisdom. God responded that because Solomon had asked for such a worthy and unselfish request, God would not only make him the wisest man on earth, but also give him riches and honor. In order to reveal the truth of this, the very next story is the famous one of two women who came to the king both claiming the same child. No one but the women actually knew whose son it was, so Solomon called for a sword. He commanded his servants to divide the child in two with the sword, and give half to each woman. The actual mother then stepped up and said, "give her the child and by no means kill him." By this reaction Solomon knew she was the real mother, gave her the child, and everybody was very impressed.

Ecclesiastes

This book written by Solomon gives theologians fits, because it seems to contradict his Proverbs' high regard for wisdom. I believe Solomon wrote it at the end of his life as he looked back at all his wealth and accomplishments, and realized he could not take it with him. It sounds as if he is quite frustrated that he is going to go out just like he came in, naked and alone. In Ecc.1, he makes some very controversial statements like "All is vanity", all of my work that I have done gives me no advantage whatsoever. People come and people go and nothing changes—nobody remembers them. Solomon set his mind to have the most knowledge and the most wisdom, but in the end, "it is striving after the wind, because in much wisdom is much grief". In chapter 2, Solomon reviews the futility of pleasure and wealth—it is all vanity. At the end of Ecc.2 we get the first clue about where Solomon is going with all this. The best thing to do is enjoy everything God has given you. Again in chapter 3

he concludes that the thing to do is be happy with what God has given, and remember that God will judge everything in the end.

The overriding theme throughout the book of Ecclesiastes is the futility of riches, wisdom, and pleasures. Solomon was saying that the money he made would be squandered, the buildings he built would deteriorate, the parks would turn to weeds, the peace treaties would be broken, and his palace and temple would be burned down, so all is vanity, like chasing after the wind. Nevertheless, there is hope and meaning in his conclusion of Ecc.12. Fear God, submit to God, and obey God; for there is no life or fulfillment apart from God. We were made to have a relationship with God, and serve God. Apart from God, we are all chasing the wind.

How did Solomon's life end? No one in history had greater advantages and blessings than Solomon, yet he could not bear the burden, and he broke every law of God. Solomon's mistake was that he lived like he was in the land of the living going towards the land of the dying. The truth is that we are in the land of the dying going towards the land of the living. Solomon has a very real message for all of us who live in a culture of gross materialism, "Fear God, believe in God, obey God, for each of us will stand before God and give an account". For us, that means we need to embrace and commit ourselves to the Savior that God sent into the world to atone for our sins.

Do you want to stand alone before God, or do you want an advocate who is God's own Son?

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