

May 12

1 Kings 2-3

Our reading opened today with King Solomon cleaning house as he works to establish a peaceful beginning to his reign as King. In following his father, David's, closing instructions about his servants and enemies (like Shimei) Solomon seems to have the policy, "give them enough rope and let them hang themselves." We see that Adonijah's ambition would not let him rest, and so he schemed to claim Abishag, the concubine of David, as his own. That move was probably calculated to strengthen a subsequent claim to the throne. Solomon certainly interpreted it that way and Adonijah's fate was sealed and was taken out by Benaiah. Shimei (the Benjamite relative of Saul who publicly cursed David) violates an agreement he made with King Solomon and in turn is killed by Benaiah. Joab, probably because of his military connections, is treated more aggressively. He, as well, is executed by, you got it, Benaiah. I don't know about you, but I am sure glad I don't have Benaiah's job...

Another way we see Solomon sought peace for his Kingdom was by marrying the daughter of Egypt's pharaoh. The act secured a military treaty, an alliance, with Egypt. Probably it was the daughter of Pharaoh Siamon, one of the last rulers of Egypt's 21st dynasty. Since we know from Egyptian history that it was highly unusual for an Egyptian princess to be married to anyone who was not Egyptian, there is evidence in this of how important Israel had become under David and continued to be under Solomon. Such an alliance with one of the most powerful nations in the world would have insured peace along the southern boundaries of Israel and allowed Solomon to focus his attention elsewhere.

What looked great from the human side, however, carried with it a terrible liability - with Egypt's princess came Egypt's religion, and in order to accommodate his new wife, Solomon apparently left the door open for her to worship her own gods. In any case, he allowed the practice of using pagan altars on the high places, which were meant for the worship of the God of Israel. I want to stop here for a moment to try to clarify the worship situation before the building of the temple. The Canaanites, who the Israelites drove out, had worshipped Baal by placing altars on high hills. After the conquest, but before the temple was built, the Israelites took over at least some of those sites for the worship of Jehovah. This practice is not condoned, in fact, it is condemned by Scripture, but in fact it happened. At other sites, the Israelites were allowed by God to build altars for true worship of God. The primary one was at Gibeon, where the tabernacle of the Lord was still located awaiting the construction of the temple. These places were also called "high places". That is why on the one hand chapter 3 says Solomon followed the Lord except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places, indicating God's disapproval of the practice, but in the next verse it tells us that the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream at one of the high places, apparently indicating God's pleasure with him. The apparent discrepancy disappears when you understand that some of the high places (including, and especially Gibeon) were approved by God, while others either had been originally used for pagan worship

and were now being used by the Israelites for the worship of the Lord -- without God's approval -- OR possibly they were still being used for the worship of gods other than Jehovah. It is certainly true that Solomon both tolerated and even encouraged "syncretism" in the religion of Israel. "Syncretism," by the way, is what happens when you "mix" pure theology and practice with ideas and practices that come from other religions -- in this case, the religions of his many foreign wives.

At the beginning of his reign, however, Solomon does follow the Lord. He starts well and God is pleased with what He sees.

Lastly for today, I wanted to comment on Solomon's life-changing request. If God gave you one wish and said, 'Take anything you want,' I wonder what you would ask for. Solomon asked for a discerning spirit. He asked for wisdom. The "wisdom of Solomon" has become legendary. But just exactly what is wisdom? One author says that wisdom is the ability "to distinguish right and wrong and to decide and govern. It is based upon a heart and mind that listens to and obeys God."

The Book of Proverbs will have a great deal to say about the subject of wisdom, but for now it will suffice for us to remember that Solomon says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

The example that is given here of Solomon's wisdom in action is a well known one. When two prostitutes appear before him, each claiming that the one surviving child is her own, Solomon feigns an inability to decide and proposes cutting the child in two, eliciting a plea from the real mother to award the baby to her rival. Thus Solomon identifies the real mother by her love.

There is an important principle in evidence here. Because Solomon asks for that which is righteous and honors God, God is pleased not only to give him what he asks for, but other things as well -- honor and riches. This is the same principle in action that we find in Jesus' words, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you..." It happened to Solomon and it will happen to you as well. When our priorities are right, when we ask God for what He wants to give us, we often will find ourselves blessed beyond all measure in other areas of our life as well.