

Sermon Wisdom and Grace 23.08.15
I Kings 3:3-14 | Cor. 1:15-25 Julian Templeton
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In our readings from I Kings, the theme of *wisdom* is prominent. When Solomon is asked in a dream by the Lord what gift he wishes to have, he asks for wisdom. In fact the *manner* in which he asks indicates that he possesses the prerequisite attitude necessary to become wise. Solomon first recognises that his experience is not equal to the task for which he has been crowned. He admits, “. . . I am a mere child, unskilled in leadership.” (I Kings 3:7) Solomon first of all shows *humility*. He admits that he does not have the required experience and skills and therefore is willing to learn and acquire them. Second, Solomon recognises that he is ruler of a large number of subjects, and therefore he will need to be a good *listener*. Third, following straight on from being a good listener, Solomon asks for *discernment*, the ability to govern justly and distinguish good from evil. Solomon recognises that he will be wholly unequal to the position and task of governing the people unless he cultivates wisdom in the form of humility, listening, and discernment. The Lord is pleased with Solomon’s request, and says:

Because you have asked for this, and not for long life, or for wealth, or for the lives of your enemies, but have asked for discernment in administering justice, I grant your request; I give you a heart so wise and so understanding that there has been none like you before your time, nor will there be after you. What is more, I give you those things for which you did not ask, such wealth and glory as no king of your time can match. If you conform to my ways and observe my ordinances

and commandments, as your father David did, I will also give you long life. (I Kings 3:10-14)

The belief that if one seeks the wisdom of God, God will deliver wealth and glory and long life aligns with the view in the book of Proverbs.¹ According to Proverbs, there are stable patterns operating in the world, a moral cause-and-effect overseen by a just God. God rewards the wise who who fear him and punishes the foolish who ignore him. Yet this view in Proverbs is challenged by other OT voices. For example, Job is blameless in all his ways, yet he suffers devastating losses of health and property and family. Ecclesiastes strongly suggests that both the wise and the foolish ultimately have the same fate: death. Indeed, the author of Ecclesiastes (*Koheleth*) apparently applied himself to gaining wisdom but discovered that “in much wisdom is much vexation; the more knowledge, the more suffering.” This is rather disconcerting for those with a studious orientation! The moment one attempts to grasp at a stable law of moral cause-and-effect, one finds that it is like a vapour (Hb. *hebel*) or wind that slips away when one tries to control it. (See Eccl. 1:17-18). The most constructive doctrine that the author of this book is willing to venture is that every activity has its right time and season, and that to be able to eat and drink and enjoy oneself is a gift from God. (See Eccl. 3:1-13).

Although the Book of Kings from which our main reading comes this morning might be read as an endorsement of the viewpoint of Proverbs, the overall effect when one reads about the reigns of Solomon and other kings is closer to the viewpoint of Ecclesiastes. We might expect that good and

¹ The argument of this and the following paragraph is taken from Peter Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 18-20, SCM Theological Commentary on the Bible, London: SCM Press, 2006

faithful kings will achieve wealth and glory and long life, while bad kings will receive stinging rebukes from prophets and come to a sorry end. However, it is not as straightforward as that. Sometimes good kings are defeated by more powerful enemies. Sometimes bad kings are rescued by circumstances turning in their favour. And this would seem to align more closely with the viewpoint of Ecclesiastes that finding meaning in events is elusive, and that attempting to control events is futile. The practical wisdom of Proverbs is undoubtedly helpful to the kings and to us when attempting to find meaning and navigate our way through events beyond our control. Humility, listening, and discernment—such as Solomon requested—are very useful qualities and life skills; but cultivating and practising them is no insurance policy against the shocks and losses of life. Wisdom may help us to moderate our reaction to the things that happen to us and to others; what it can't do is affect or control those happenings.

There is only One with the power to affect and control happenings and events, and that is the Lord God Almighty. However, the Lord God, in deliberately giving his creatures freedom, does not micro-manage events for our convenience; he calls us to *trust* him in all events. In good times and in bad; come rain or come shine; “for better, for worse; for richer for poorer; in sickness and in health.” The latter demonstrating that if the believer's faith in God is to endure, much the same expectation of trust and loyalty through life's ups and downs obtains as between spouses in marriage.

Although Solomon arranges for the Temple in Jerusalem to be built and makes Israel secure during his reign; near the end of his reign he makes some unwise choices that cause his trust in God to falter. Solomon reputedly accumulates 700 wives, all princesses, and 300 concubines in the course of his reign (1

Kings 11:3). Even if the figure of 1000 women in the royal court has been inflated by literary licence (following the OT practice of indicating honour by large numbers), we may speculate with some accuracy that a sizeable proportion of Solomon's attention must have been taken up with his conjugal duties! The author of 1 Kings comments that Solomon's many wives and concubines increasingly influenced his decisions; some of them from the nations with which the Lord has forbidden Israel to intermarry. “As he grew old, his wives turned his heart to follow other gods, and he did not remain wholly loyal to the Lord his God . . . he followed Ashtoreth, goddess of the Sidonians, and Milcom, the loathsome god of the Ammonites.” (1 Kings 11:4-5). He built shrines for these others gods to whom his foreign wives burnt offerings and made sacrifices. (1 Kings 11:6-8).

The mention here of offerings and sacrifices reminds us that religious duty and worship can be yet another way of attempting to control the uncontrollable events of life. We can believe that if we do our religious duty, turn up to worship on a regular basis, then God will be kind to us and those we love. Here also, however, we find there is no cause-and-effect. For example, while the medics provide evidence-based surveys on the links between healthy lifestyles and good health; some religious people with very healthy habits suddenly lose their good health; others, heedless of healthy-living advice, retain a robust constitution. Marriages and relationships in religious families can break down, sometimes irretrievably. And when one begins to factor in larger-scale unpredictable events such as financial crashes, wars, forced migrations, and famines, we soon realise that the religious are not cushioned from uncontrollable happenings.

Saul, who would later become the Apostle Paul, had evidently been educated to believe that if one kept God's Torah, or Law, with enough rigour and fervour, one could find one's way to a life that was right with God. For Saul, this was not only a personal belief but one he felt duty bound to impose on others also. But something happens to Saul that he could not have predicted nor was able to control: the Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, ambushes him on the road to Damascus. When God sought Saul in the person of the Jesus Christ, Saul came to realise that strict Torah observance did not bring the righteous life that he sought. Although the crucified Jesus was scandalous to Jews and foolish to Gentiles, Saul realises from his own experience that Jesus is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish!
As God in his wisdom ordained, the world failed to find him by its wisdom, and he chose by the folly of the gospel to save those who have faith. Jews demand signs, Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ nailed to the cross; and though this is an offence to Jews and folly to Gentiles, yet to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, he is the power of God and the wisdom of God.
I Cor. 1:20b-24

Jesus gives the lie to the whole idea that there is some strict moral law of cause-and-effect in operation, since Jesus, who was wholly innocent of sin, was crucified as a sinner. Jesus revealed to Paul, and reveals to us if we have ears to hear, that the secret law of the universe is not cause-and-effect but the crucified Jesus Christ in whom God shows us his *grace*.

The accumulation of wisdom can become a source of human pride, and the practice of wisdom can make considerable

demands on people. If one is not careful, wisdom can become the pursuit of the 'deserving'.² What Paul comes to realise is that the crucified Christ reveals God's grace to the *undeserving*, that is: *all* of us. By our own lights we can each construct reasons for why we believe we are deserving of good fortune in life. But by the brilliant light of God's holiness, one suspects that our individual accumulations of moral credit look rather different. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; and all are put right by God's free grace alone," writes Paul (Rom. 3:23-24).

After my first marriage broke down it was only by God's grace, and through the graciousness of many of you here, that I remained in the ministry. Equally, as pastor I have tried to support some of you through trials and troubles that could have caused you to abandon the Christian faith. Yet, by God's grace you have endured and have continued in faith, hope, and love. This is God's hidden wisdom revealed in the crucified Christ: grace is God's undeserved help to all who are undeserving, grace is unlimited currency of the Kingdom of God, and it is what makes life liveable.

Thanks be to God.

² See Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 72-3, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987