

## READING BETWEEN THE LINES

### 1 Kings 3

The opening chapters of 1 Kings describe the accession of Solomon to the throne of Israel following his father David. Right through the history books, 1 and 2 Samuel, then 1 and 2 Kings, we find the theme of God's sovereignty, God's over-ruling, the fulfilment of God's purposes, and we can see it here.

Back in 2 Samuel chapter 7 God made a promise to David that he would establish his kingdom.

Verse 11: 'The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you.

Verse 12: I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom.

Verse 13: I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

Verse 16: Your ... throne will be established forever.'

Did you notice the repetition, established, established, established? That promise is confirmed in 1 Kings chapter 2.

Verse 12: Solomon sat on the throne of his father David, and his rule was firmly established.

Verse 24 (Solomon speaking): And now, as surely as the LORD lives – he who has established me securely on the throne of my father David ...

Verse 46: The kingdom was now firmly established in Solomon's hands.

God is sovereign. God fulfils his promises and his purposes.

Another theme which runs through the history recorded in the book of Kings is the standard by which all kings are judged. They are judged by the extent to which they observe what the LORD requires, the extent to which they uphold and obey the law of Moses. We see this in the charge which David gave to Solomon in 1 Kings chapter 2 verses 1 to 4.

When the time drew near for David to die, he gave a charge to Solomon his son. 'I am about to go the way of all the earth,' he said. 'So be strong, show yourself a man, and observe what the LORD your God requires: Walk in his ways, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and requirements, as written in the Law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go, and that the LORD may keep his promise to me: "If your descendants watch how they live, and if they walk faithfully before me with all their heart and soul, you will never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel."'

That's the theological framework of Old Testament history: God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. At every turn there is a great promise and a big 'if'. Your throne will be secure *if* you are faithful and obedient.

The Bible is always disarmingly honest when it comes to describing the great men of the past. Over the years people have written lives of the saints. We call it hagiography, and one of the features of hagiography is the tendency to exaggerate the good things about those people and gloss over or ignore their faults.

The Bible is not like that. It tells it like it is. Earlier we read chapter 3 of 1 Kings but that's not where the story begins. Chapter 1 begins with King David – still alive, but only just. He's old and weak and impotent and there's a race to see which of his sons will succeed him. His son Adonijah makes a play for the throne but Solomon gets there first. It's a convoluted tale of plot, counter-plot and political manoeuvring.

Chapter 2 is a rather grim account which does not reflect well on either David or Solomon. Adonijah was Solomon's brother and his main rival. When Adonijah tried to seize the throne he was supported by Joab and Shimei. By the end of the chapter all three were dead, Adonijah, Joab and Shimei. Not only was Solomon responsible for their deaths but he was urged on by David before he died.

Listen to what David said to Solomon about Shimei.

Verses 8–9: And remember, you have with you Shimei son of Gera, the Benjamite from Bahurim, who called down bitter curses on me the day I went to Mahanaim. When he came down to meet me at the Jordan, I swore to him by the LORD: 'I will not put you to death by the sword.' But now, do not consider him innocent. You are a man of wisdom; you will know what to do to him. Bring his grey head down to the grave in blood.

In other words, David is saying, 'I swore an oath not to kill him but that doesn't stop you.'

At the end of chapter 2 we read, 'The kingdom was now firmly established in Solomon's hands,' but the historian wants us to read between the lines and when we do we find this sordid, brutal, unattractive series of murders and executions. Solomon was a ruthless king who secured power by wiping out the opposition and he was encouraged in this brutality by his father David.

This brings us to chapter 3, a story we're probably familiar with from Sunday School days. The LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream and said, 'Ask for whatever you want me to give you.' Solomon thought about it and said, 'I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?' And we read, 'The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this.'

Because Solomon asked for wisdom and not for riches and honour God promised that he would have those things as well. Then we have the famous account of Solomon's wisdom in action, the case of the two prostitutes who both claimed that the child was theirs and the clever way Solomon identified which was the real mother. Chapter 3 ends on a high note: 'When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice.'

But is that the whole story? Once again the historian is inviting us to read between the lines. He does that right at the beginning. Verse 1: 'Solomon made an alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt and married his daughter.'

Solomon married Pharaoh's daughter but in chapter 11 we read, 'King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter —Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been' (verses 1–4). Solomon married many foreign wives, who led him astray, but it began with one. First steps are so important. They can take you on one-way streets from which there is no turning back.

Going back to chapter 3 verse 1 the historian goes on, 'He brought [Pharaoh's daughter] to the City of David until he finished building his palace and the temple of the LORD, and the wall around Jerusalem.' Now that sounds fine, doesn't it, but

again we must read between the lines. The order is significant: his palace and then the temple of the LORD. At the end of chapter 6 and the beginning of chapter 7 we discover that Solomon spent seven years building the temple of the LORD, but *thirteen* years completing his own palace, nearly twice as long.

Back to chapter 3 and verses 2 and 3. 'The people, however, were still sacrificing at the high places, because a temple had not yet been built for the Name of the LORD. Solomon showed his love for the LORD by walking according to the statutes of his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places.'

What we have here is a kind of sandwich. In the centre is the very positive statement: 'Solomon showed his love for the LORD by walking according to the statutes of his father David.' But either side of it is the damning information that the people were still sacrificing at the high places because the temple had not yet been built and Solomon himself offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places.

The problem with worship at the high places was that it was open to compromise with pagan religion. If we fast forward to chapter 11 again, there we read in verses 7 and 8: 'On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods.'

Solomon loved the LORD but he also loved his foreign wives. Solomon built the temple at Jerusalem but he also retained the high places. When we come to God in worship we must come his way. We must come with a whole-hearted, undivided heart. Reading between the lines that's what Solomon failed to do.

And so, in his dream, he saw himself as a little child asking for wisdom. It's a rather different picture from the one we get in chapter 2 verse 6, where David tells him how to deal with his enemy, Joab. 'Deal with him according to your wisdom, but do not let his grey head go down to the grave in peace.' It's there again in verse 9 in David's instructions about Shimei: 'You are a man of wisdom; you will know what to do to him. Bring his grey head down to the grave in blood.'

The framework of Israel's story is God's sovereignty and man's responsibility, but right at the start Solomon is portrayed as failing to measure up to God's standards, his failure and sin – his compromise at best and brutality at worst.

So here is a mystery. God promises to establish David's throne but that promise is conditional on the king's obedience. Yet even Solomon in all his wisdom was foolish in many respects and even David, the man after God's own heart, showed a ruthless streak at the very end. If we read between the lines we discover that God keeps his promise in spite of man's performance, not because of it.

All this brings us to this table of communion. It speaks of reconciliation, peace with God, fellowship with the Almighty. That is only possible on the basis of obedience, righteousness, goodness. Reading between the lines of our own lives we know we fall far short and we're driven to the conclusion that the basis on which we approach God is not anything in us but all of his grace. And this table reminds us how that grace operates.

The broken bread speaks of Christ's body, broken for us. The outpoured wine speaks of his blood, shed for us. The basis of our approach to God, the basis of our salvation is not our righteousness but his, and it's that which guarantees the fulfilment of God's promise.