

A Study in 1 Kings 3:3–15

Solomon at Gibeon: Seeds of Departure and the Blank Check

We are reading from 1 Kings chapter 3, beginning at verse 3.

"And Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of David his father: only he sacrificed and burnt incense in high places."

"The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there; for that was the great high place: a thousand burnt offerings did Solomon offer upon that altar. In Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night: and God said, Ask what I shall give thee."

"And Solomon said, Thou hast shewed unto thy servant David my father great mercy, according as he walked before thee in truth, and in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with thee... Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people?"

"And the speech pleased the LORD, that Solomon had asked this thing. God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment: Behold, I have done according to thy words... And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches, and honour... And if thou wilt walk in my ways, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as thy father David did walk, then I will lengthen thy days."

"And Solomon awoke; and behold, it was a dream. And he came to Jerusalem, and stood before the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and offered up burnt offerings, and offered peace offerings, and made a feast to all his servants."

Seeds of Departure — What Verse 3 Does Not Say

Verse 3 begins well: Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of David his father. That is an excellent beginning, and one would not want to remove it. But it does not tell the whole story. The word only introduces a qualification: only he sacrificed and burnt incense in high places. And there are several things in the opening verses of this chapter that, though individually perhaps not radical, are seeds of what would later blossom into full departure.

Solomon mentions his own house before the house of the Lord in verse 1. The daughter of Pharaoh is mentioned — and while the Lord turned that into something of a type, the practice of forming political alliances through marriage with foreign women was the beginning of what 1 Kings 11 records explicitly: when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods. And then the offering in high places. Verse 2 says the people still sacrificed in high places; verse 3 says Solomon did the same, with the single qualification only. There is a pattern visible in these opening verses, a mixture of genuine love for the Lord and small compromises that will eventually accumulate.

The High Places — Convenient, but Not Appointed

The offering in high places was not a violent transgression — it was a departure of a subtler kind. Deuteronomy 12:13–14 had said plainly: Take heed to thyself that thou offer not thy burnt offerings in every place that thou seest, but in the place which the LORD shall choose. The word high places in Hebrew carries the sense of convenient or suitable places — places that seemed good to the eye of the worshipper, not necessarily the place God had appointed.

Solomon knew well where God's appointed place was. In verse 6 he speaks of David his father walking before God in truth and righteousness and uprightness of heart. And in verse 15, at the end of the chapter, after awakening from the dream, he comes to Jerusalem and stands before the ark of the covenant of the LORD — and offers burnt offerings and peace offerings there. That was what his father David had done. It was a return to the right place.

The point is not that there was an explicit law against high places in every case. It is something more subtle: the difference between having an express commandment against something and actively seeking the mind of God in a matter. One can find room to maneuver around explicit words, especially when the circumstances seem to explain or justify the departure. The temple was not yet built. The ark and the tabernacle were in different places. There were reasons that could be given. But the question is always whether we are actively seeking the place God has chosen, or settling for the convenient place that seems good in our own eyes.

This has immediate application to the question of gathering to the Lord's name. God has expressed His mind through His word about the place where His name is to be remembered. To be occupied with a convenient place — a community church, an independent group, a denomination — because it is comfortable and active and apparently blessed, is the spirit of the high places. God overrules; He blesses souls there; but that does not mean He has sanctioned it. He blessed Solomon at Gibeon. That does not mean Gibeon was where Solomon ought to have been.

The Thousand Burnt Offerings — and What Solomon Did Not Do

A thousand burnt offerings is an impressive number. But the number itself is not the point. The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ was always what God had in view in every sacrifice — one offering, offered once, perfecting forever those who are sanctified. If scripture were a book designed to impress with numbers, the sacrifices would have grown greater and greater as the story progressed. Instead, the trajectory leads to one.

What Solomon did in quantity at Gibeon stands in contrast to what he did not do. Deuteronomy 17:18–19 had given explicit instruction for the king: when he sits upon the throne of his kingdom, he shall write him a copy of this law in a book out of that which is before the priests, and it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God. There is no record that Solomon ever did this fourth thing. He multiplied horses — forbidden. He multiplied wives — forbidden. He multiplied silver and gold — forbidden. And apparently he did not write out a personal copy of the law and keep it with him.

Reading makes an informed person; writing makes an accurate person. When you write something, you attend to it with precision. To write out the word of God in one's own hand is to make it personal, to internalize it. The absence of this discipline may well explain why Solomon, with all his God-given wisdom, was eventually turned aside. Wisdom does not keep us under trial — only grace does. David's failures were personal; his discharge of the kingdom committed to him was faithful. Solomon's wisdom was great, but when it was tested by the accumulated weight of his compromises, it was not sufficient. Grace — not wisdom — is what keeps a soul.

The Blank Check — Ask What I Shall Give Thee

God's offer to Solomon in the dream — ask what I shall give thee — is one of the remarkable moments in Scripture. It is a blank check: ask anything. The same kind of offer appears elsewhere. Jabez prayed simply (1 Chronicles 4:10): bless me, enlarge my territory, let thine hand be with me, keep me from evil — and God granted him his request. The Lord Jesus Himself said: Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you.

But these blank checks are not what the flesh imagines. They are not invitations to fill in any desire the natural heart may have. The key is in Psalm 37:4: Delight thyself also in the LORD, and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. The heart follows the treasure: where my treasure is, there will my heart be also. If my treasure is the Lord Himself, if my delight is in Him, then He will form my desires — and those desires will be His desires, not mine. James explains the failure of asking: ye ask and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts. The blank check has a condition written across it invisibly: delight thyself in the Lord.

Isaiah 58:13–14 shows us how this delighting is cultivated: If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day... not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words, then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD. It is the setting aside of self-will, self-pleasure, and self-expression that opens the soul to genuine delight in God. When that is in place, prayer becomes aligned with His purposes, and His desire becomes ours.

What Solomon asked for — an understanding heart to judge this great people — pleased the Lord, because it was not for himself but for the service to which God had called him. God gave him that and more: riches and honor besides. But then came the if: if thou wilt walk in my ways, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as thy father David did walk, then I will lengthen thy days. God told Solomon just what Moses had written — not more, not less. The length of his days would depend on the maintenance of that walk. As to the flesh, Solomon could not do it. And Ecclesiastes is the record of what he found when he tried everything else instead.

Solomon Awoke and Came to Jerusalem

It is significant that when Solomon awoke from the dream he came to Jerusalem — not back to Gibeon — and stood before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. There he offered burnt offerings and peace offerings, as his father David had done. It looks like a route to recovery: back to the place God had chosen, before the ark, with the same order of sacrifices that had characterized David's heart.

The contrast between David and Solomon is illuminating. David's failures were intensely personal; in the discharge of the kingdom — its order, its government, its center of worship — he was faithful to God's mind. He brought the ark to Jerusalem; he sought the chosen place; he had the ark before him constantly. Solomon had that example before him. He knew his father's walk. But a known example is not sufficient to keep a man. He needs the word of God made personal — written in his own hand, read daily, feared and kept. That is the fourth commandment of Deuteronomy 17 that Solomon appears never to have fulfilled.

We are never beyond danger — not when young, not when old. Abraham, in old age, started to go down to Egypt again because of a famine, just as he had done as a young man. He never got there, but the temptation was the same. Solomon, when he was old, his wives turned away his heart. The path of safety, always, is the humble and daily walk with the word of God, made personal and kept close — not a thousand offerings and then back to the high places, but the quiet daily habit of communion with the Lord in His word, which alone forms the heart that can fill a blank check aright.

Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. — Psalm 37:4