

A Message from 1 Kings 3:16–28

The Wisdom of Solomon and a Greater Wisdom Still

We read this evening from 1 Kings chapter 3, beginning at verse 16.

"Then came there two women that were harlots unto the king, and stood before him. And the one woman said, O my lord, I and this woman dwell in one house, and I was delivered of a child with her in the house. And it came to pass the third day after I was delivered that this woman was delivered also. And we were together; there was no stranger with us in the house, save we two in the house."

"And this woman's child died in the night, because she overlaid it. And she arose at midnight, and took my son from beside me while thine handmaid slept, and laid it in her bosom, and laid her dead child in my bosom. And when I rose in the morning to give my child suck, behold, it was dead. But when I considered it in the morning, behold, it was not my son which I did bear."

"And the other woman said, Nay, but the living is my son, and the dead is thy son. And this said, No, but the dead is thy son, and the living is my son. Thus they spake before the king."

"Then said the king, The one saith, This is my son that liveth, and thy son is the dead. And the other saith, Nay, but thy son is the dead, and my son is the living. And the king said, Bring me a sword. And they brought a sword before the king. And the king said, Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one, and half to the other."

"Then spake the woman whose the living child was unto the king, for her bowels yearned upon her son, and she said, O my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it. But the other said, Let it be neither mine nor thine, but divide it."

"Then the king answered and said, Give her the living child, and in no wise slay it. She is the mother thereof. And all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had judged, and they feared the king, for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to do judgment."

The Wisdom of Solomon — and a Greater Wisdom Still

When the Lord Jesus is on the throne and the new Israel is under the new covenant, such things will not go on, for Scripture says they shall all be righteous. But this account is very timely here in 1 Kings, and it is superintended by God to bring out the point He intends to make.

In the previous two chapters Solomon had already displayed remarkable judgment in dealing with Joab, Shimei, and Adonijah. But here, having prayed and received what God had promised, there is more reason still to speak of his wisdom. And yet the wisdom of the Lord Jesus is of an altogether different and higher order — infinite, the same before and now and forever. As to His divine wisdom, it never had ups or downs. As to His human wisdom, He grew in stature and wisdom from infancy to manhood, but whatever was wise and appropriate at every stage of His life, that was what came out of Him — perfectly and without exception.

In John's Gospel we read a remarkable phrase: Jesus knowing. Not when Jesus knew, as if He discovered something at that point, but Jesus knowing — indicating that the knowledge was always present. This is the inscrutability of His person: the same Gospel that opens by declaring His deity shows us His human name, Jesus, knowing. He knows facts, He knows circumstances, but more than that, He knows persons. He knew Nathanael. He knows us too. The remarkable thing is that He loves us, in spite of knowing us fully.

Two Women, One House: A Picture of Lostness

What confronted King Solomon was a case of gross moral evil. Before a single word was spoken about the child, the nature of the case itself was an abominable thing. Two harlots, unwed mothers, dwelling together in one house — the details paint a picture that every generation understands: poverty, lostness, lives lived entirely for what can be gotten for oneself, with nothing of God in their thoughts. As the Psalm says, the fool has said in his heart, there is no God. That does not mean the words are always spoken; it means God has no practical place in the life.

Scripture does recognize natural affection, and it speaks of the last days as a time when even that will be increasingly absent. One of these two women apparently had more natural affection than the other. One was a heavier sleeper, and yet she rolled over on her own child in the night and killed him. And having done so, she arose at midnight — a fitting hour for such a story, since men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil — and exchanged the children without waking the other woman. Both were equally lost before God, but there was a difference between them. And God gave wisdom to Solomon to discern that difference and do justice.

Solomon and the Scribes in John 8

It is instructive to read this account in 1 Kings alongside the opening of John 8. In both cases, a difficult case of moral evil is brought before a king or judge. In both, wisdom is required. But the difference between what Solomon did and what the Lord Jesus did is the difference between night and day.

Solomon, in all his wisdom, never addressed the occupation of those two women. He never said, Go and sin no more. But that is exactly what the Lord Jesus said in John 8. The scribes and Pharisees brought before Him a woman taken in adultery — a case of moral evil, intended as a trap. And the result was that they went out one by one, from the eldest to the last, their own consciences convicted. When only the woman remained, He said, Neither do I condemn thee — go and sin no more.

James says that the wisdom which is from above is first pure. The wisdom the Lord Jesus displayed was demonstrably pure: every accusing heart withdrew, unable to stand before it. Solomon dealt with acts. The Lord Jesus dealt with the state of the heart. The cross has brought sin in its nature into far greater relief than it ever came out under the law. That is part of the difference between the Testaments. And it is that deeper wisdom — dealing not just with what a person has done, but with what they are — that distinguishes the Lord Jesus from Solomon in all his glory.

The Living Child and the One Precious Thing

The simplicity of what Solomon said is what makes the account so memorable. Anyone might have said: bring a sword and divide the child. It was obvious, commonplace, straightforward. And then all at once the light shone. What is remarkable is that the passage never actually says which woman the living child belonged to. It never identifies her by position or by name or by which spoke first. Yet the moment the sword was commanded, everyone knew — instantly and beyond doubt. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

There is an application worth considering. In the one kingdom of Israel there were eventually two parties — ten tribes and two. And when the division came, there was one precious thing left in Israel, not two. The temple was still in Jerusalem. The priests were still there. The twelve loaves were still set out on the pure table, expressive of national unity even after division had taken place. But Jeroboam had only two golden calves and the grossest of idolatry. Who could not see where the one precious thing was? And yet the blindness of the flesh was so great that the vast majority of the men of Israel could not tell — or would not tell.

Mr. Kelly once made an application of this passage to the truth of God: those who do not have it are ready to divide it. Those who do not truly possess the truth of the one body are quite prepared to cut it up — to say this denomination presses this, and that denomination presses that, and all of it is good. You chop up the truth of the one body. The false mother, those who do not truly have the living thing, are ready to divide it. The true mother would rather give it away entire than have it destroyed.

Justice, Fear, and the Kingdom

The closing verse of our reading carries great weight: all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had judged, and they feared the king, for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice. As Solomon himself later wrote in Ecclesiastes, because sentence against an evil work is not speedily executed, therefore the hearts of the sons of men are fully set in them to do evil. Swift and exact justice, faithfully fitted to the case, is what restrains the criminal passions that lie latent in every human heart. The fear of the king here was right and proper — it was the fruit of justice being seen to be done.

What is characteristic of the kingdom under Solomon, as opposed to the kingdom under David, is that the great external conflicts had already been settled. David fought the enemies; Solomon received the settled kingdom. What comes before Solomon is not a Philistine army — it is cases like this one, requiring discriminatory judgment. And when the Lord Jesus reigns, His wisdom will exceed Solomon's as far as Solomon's exceeded ordinary men. But there will be no occasion for such wisdom as this, because they shall all be righteous.

David and Solomon as Types of Christ

It was an important insight worked out in the 1800s that it takes both David and Solomon together to set forth the coming and the kingdom of the Lord Jesus. David speaks to the warrior aspect — the conflicts, the victories, the suffering before the glory. Solomon speaks to the kingdom aspect — the peace, the settled reign, the wisdom and the building. The Lord Jesus is both: the one who fought and the one who reigns. Both figures are needed to hold together the fullness of what He is.

Solomon's failure in his later years is also a solemn lesson. Youthful lusts, as the Apostle Paul warns Timothy against, are not limited to the young. Solomon tried everything — music, planting, building, acquisition — and his conclusion was that it was all vanity and pursuit of the wind. He found out what anyone who tries those things will find. The point is not that knowledge is wrong, but that the heart got so drawn into the things themselves that they displaced the Lord. And that is the lesson of Ecclesiastes for every age: things down here are vanity and vexation of spirit. David, with all his personal failures, did not do the things that brought discipline on the kingdom — and he had a good end. Jacob, with all his misses and turnings, arrived at a magnificent latter end: leaning on his staff, crossing his hands to give the right blessing, worshipping. That says everything about where his soul had arrived.

May the Lord keep us cleaving to Him with purpose of heart, that we might finish our course well and with joy.