

1 Kings 3:1–5 — Solomon Loved the LORD

The High Places, the Blank Check, David's Example, and Grace Greater Than Wisdom

Scripture Reading: 1 Kings 3:1–5

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

Seeds at the Beginning

These opening verses of chapter 3 bring before us a number of things that sit uneasily together. Solomon marrying a daughter of Pharaoh, his house mentioned before the house of the Lord, the people still sacrificing in high places, and then Solomon himself going to the great high place at Gibeon. The word only appears in verse 2 about the people — only they sacrificed in the high places — and then again in verse 3 about Solomon himself. These are not dramatic apostasies. They are seeds. But seeds they are, and the reader of the whole story sees in them the first hints of what blossomed much later into something far worse.

The chapter before this one was occupied entirely with Solomon's purging of the kingdom — Adonijah, Joab, Abiathar, Shimei. Everything brought into governmental order. Then in chapter 3 the kingdom is established, and it begins

here with some incipient departures, some things not quite right, before it opens into the magnificent scene of God's appearance and Solomon's great prayer.

The High Places: Convenient Rather Than Right

Deuteronomy 12:13 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." That place had been found. David had brought the ark to Jerusalem, pitched a tent for it, and offered his sacrifices there before it. The ark was there. Jerusalem was the place. Solomon knew this — he knew his father's walk intimately, as his prayer in verse 6 shows.

Yet he goes to Gibeon, where the tabernacle was, a great high place, and offers a thousand burnt offerings there. There was no law against it in the strictest sense — the temple had not yet been built, and the tabernacle was at Gibeon. A man could argue around it. But having an express commandment against something is not the same thing as seeking God's mind about a matter. David had the ark before him and offered there. Solomon did not need to go to Gibeon. He chose the great, impressive, convenient high place instead of the low place before the ark in Jerusalem.

This tendency to offer in high places continued in David's descendants and has its counterpart in Christendom today. The high places are convenient places — the word in Hebrew has that sense. Denominational affiliations may be presided over by godly leaders faithful to their measure of light. But they are convenient, not right. The question is not whether the Lord blesses souls there, for God does not abandon his people in their disorder. The question is whether the Lord's name is dishonored by the other names being carried. God's blessing in an imperfect place does not constitute his sanction of the imperfection. J.G. Bellett's self-condemnation after his years of fruitful work in New Zealand, when truth was freshly brought before his conscience, is instructive here: he did not argue

from the blessing to justify the departure. The Lord blesses despite disorder, not because of it.

David's Example: The Ark Before Him

First Chronicles 16:1–2 gives the contrast in a few words. When David brought up the ark to Jerusalem, he offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before it — right there, at the tent in Jerusalem, where God had put his name. There was no going to a great high place. David was attached to the ark. The ark was always before him. Where the ark was, that was where David offered.

The ark was the meeting place between God and his people, the place from which counsel was given: “There I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee.” For David, the ark was everything. A wise and understanding heart, had Solomon maintained the spirit of his father, would have instinctively gone to the ark rather than to the great high place. But the ark was in a tent, and the high place at Gibeon was great.

The Blank Check: God Said, Ask What I Shall Give Thee

Verse 5 is remarkable: in Gibeon, the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream and said, “Ask what I shall give thee.” It is, in the language of our day, a blank check — an open invitation to name the thing desired, with the full weight of divine willingness behind it. It is not the only time such an offer was made in Scripture, but it is among the most notable.

The invitation put Solomon to the test. And the test revealed both the goodness of what was there and the limitation. He asked wisely. But notice: it was a dream, not the highest form of divine communication. God spoke to prophets by dreams, but he spoke to Moses mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in dark speeches (Numbers 12:7–8). Solomon's father had Nathan come to him — a prophet sent directly from God. One might note the slight difference in the quality of the

communication, alongside the grandeur of the invitation.

The blank check has a spiritual counterpart in the promise of Psalm 37:4: “Delight thyself also in the LORD, and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.” The flesh reads that as permission to ask for anything the flesh wants. But the verse has an if in it: first, delight. And when the delight is truly in the Lord, the desires are formed by that delight and become his desires, not the flesh’s. Isaiah 58:13 makes the connection explicit: if you turn from your own ways and call the Sabbath a delight, then you shall delight yourself in the Lord. The blank check is a promise to those whose hearts are formed by delight in him — not a license for the flesh to name its price.

The Thousand Burnt Offerings and the One Offering of Christ

A thousand burnt offerings is a large and impressive number. It would be easy to be overawed by it. But those thousand burnt offerings all point forward to the one offering of Christ upon the cross. If God’s purpose had been to impress by size and number, then Genesis would have had one offering, 1 Kings a thousand, the Prophets a million, and the New Testament a billion. Instead, the truth runs the other way: the multiplied offerings of the Old Testament are all shadows pointing toward the one perfect, finished, unrepeatable sacrifice. One is the weight of it. Many speak of need; one speaks of adequacy.

Grace Greater Than Wisdom: David and Solomon Compared

A comment worth preserving: grace was greater than wisdom. David was a man given great grace and mercy; Solomon was given great wisdom. David made grievous personal failures, but they were all of a personal character. His discharge of the kingdom — the work God gave him to do, the maintaining of God’s order — he did faithfully to the end. He never departed from the divine order of the kingdom, never allowed division, never introduced the seeds that

would fracture what God had given him. Solomon, given wisdom beyond all men, allowed precisely those seeds to grow until the kingdom was rent.

Knowledge and wisdom are not the same thing. Knowledge is an acquaintance with facts; wisdom is the use of knowledge to advantage. It can be used to God's advantage or to one's own. The children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light — the unrighteous can use wisdom for their own ends with great effectiveness. That is a terrible thing. And wisdom received from God, not made personal by writing it out, not guarded by the daily habit of making God's word one's own, can be allowed to serve the flesh rather than the Lord. Deuteronomy 17 had required Israel's king to write out a copy of the law for himself and read it all the days of his life. Solomon did not do this, as far as the record shows. Grace kept David; wisdom unguarded by personal appropriation of the word did not keep Solomon.

Solomon loved the LORD. A good beginning. But it does not tell the whole story.