

Sunday August 13, 2023

Lesson 11: Solomon: The Realities of Human Kingship

Scripture: 1 Kings 11: 1-13

Context:

Today we continue our summer curriculum, “Inspired By God.” In this second lesson of our third and final unit, “Heroes and Anti-Heroes,” we consider how God works through various people who do not fall into neat categories. The concept of heroes and anti-heroes invites us to consider questions of daily ethics and the circumstances which influence how people make decisions. We are also reminded of the complexity of people; how seemingly good people can make unwise or out of character choices. Today’s first “anti-hero” to consider is Solomon, found in the book of First Kings. The purpose of today’s lesson will be to reflect on the forces in our lives which pull us away from our commitment to the Lord, and to consider how we deal with those forces.

For most of the reign of King Solomon, he is considered a hero and one of God’s chosen ones. He asks for wisdom and God grants him a long reign, a long life, wisdom, and riches.¹ Solomon is revered by the people and in most Christian circles is praised for his contribution to Wisdom literature as found in the Book of Solomon (or Song of Songs), the books of Proverbs, Psalms, and Ecclesiastes. He is seen as the force who helped build the Temple his father long dreamed of building to unite the people and give a central place to worship God.

Yet today puts into perspective how this hero had some skeletons in his closet. While most texts of the time would describe the collapse of a kingdom due to architectural, political, and economic externals, the book of First Kings explores the theological components.² At the center is Solomon’s sin and his decisions which led to several events set in motion.

There were two major places where Solomon erred and wandered from God. The first was the intermarriage between allied royal families, which would have been considered normal in the ancient world. It is not the number of wives presented as the problem for Solomon though; it is their nationality and accommodation of their religions which gets Solomon into trouble.³ Initially, he adds the wives to his harem, and all is well on the surface.

The second thing go get Solomon into trouble is an effect of his first choice. As Solomon ages, he begins to lose his focus on the Lord and turns to his wives and their gods and goddesses. Soon there are shrines of the neighboring religions in high holy places of Israel and Solomon worships there. God is incensed as the one thing God asked of Solomon was to follow the Lord God exclusively. Yet in God’s mercy and recognition of the promise to his father David,

¹ See 1 Kings 3 for an account of what Solomon asks for God and how God responds to him.

² Richard Nelson, “First and Second Kings,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 69.

³ *Ibid.*, 70.

Solomon is spared God's condemnation. Instead, the future of the kingdom will be split as Solomon's focus has gone from God to gods and goddesses of the day. The once famous hero now becomes an anti-hero, a plague to his own legacy.

Application

Have you ever had a hero you absolutely loved and adored, someone who you had a reverence for as you watched them move about? Right now, my nephews are into superheroes, dressing up like them and talking about them non-stop. Yet I know one day, they'll start naming older people they look up to as heroes and I will be curious to see who they choose and what is so inspirational about them.

I suspect this will happen as it happened to me too. When I was little, I was fascinated with Batman and Robin Hood; their narratives always inspiring to me. Yet as I grew older, the heroes changed to figures of history and literary backgrounds, and then eventually those around me. All of us have probably had the same experience. We see someone and something stands out about them so we are captivated, potentially wanting to be like them as we bloom and grow into our own call and identity.

However, in adulthood I have come to discover even our heroes have their Achilles' Heel, or in some cases, they have flown too close to the sun and now like Icarus, they fall to their demise. It is perhaps one of the most sobering experiences, and in some cases, grievous to watch heroes become anti-heroes. We mourn who they were and hope we can cling to the good things they showed us, being reminded of how we are all humans.

As we read the narrative of Solomon, we meet someone who is very human and starts out as a hero. He does all the right things: he calls to God for wisdom, he builds the Temple, he establishes order, and he makes the right alliances to further the kingdom. Yet as he grows older, other things start coming to focus. This hero becomes an anti-hero as he is influenced by his wives from other countries and Solomon begins to move towards worshipping their gods and goddesses, the one big thing the Lord asked him not to do.

The result of Solomon's indiscretion is the kingdom begins to collapse. It doesn't start in his age as God keeps the promise God made to David. The wheels are set in motion though and Solomon's misbehavior causes a cascade of events to impact thousands of people. This hero who rose so high crashed and burned, leaving a complicated legacy even for today.

What we find in the Christian faith though is how God works through all of us, who at times are both heroes and anti-heroes. As we sin and transgress against the Lord, God can and will still work through us. God is bigger than even the highest people we place on pedestals and God will still redeem us, as stubborn as we might be.

In recent years I have seen people I once revered do and say incredibly awful and hurtful things. It is as if in their old age, they have lost all control and have forgotten of their own calling and all the good God has done in their lives. They have started to follow the gods and goddesses of wealth, people-pleasing, and prestige. These gods and goddesses do not come as golden idols to set in mantles as instead they come in the form of social media, publicity, and nostalgia. Realpolitik has taken over and good people have gotten caught up in fear and anxiety, forgetting how anger and hatred are rooted in grief. My only prayer and observation is they are experiencing some of the more unfortunate parts of aging, where our senses begin to leave us and we are not of the same body and mind we once were in our younger years.

A mentor of mine recently reminded me of the early church father Augustine, who wrote the Christian classic *Confessions*. In his writings, Augustine named how we are all sinners in

need of grace. Even the saintliest of us is prone to wander and to sin against the Lord and our neighbor. And thus, we are reminded even our heroes will stumble and fall.

So, what are we to do? Lest we think the excuse of being a sinner allows us to do certain things, we are reminded of how God does give us gifts and tools to help us be accountable to the ways of the Lord. The place I always begin is with the number one rule John Wesley gave to his preachers and his discipleship bands: Do no harm. To paraphrase a colleague, if you think your words or actions will cause harm, they probably will, and it is best to go another way of seeking what you want to do or how you want to be in this world. And if you need some help, call and talk to a brother or sister in Christ who will help hold you in the light. None of us can do it alone and even the most powerful superheroes had their sidekicks to help them stay on the path.

God will still be at work in our story whether we are a hero or anti-hero. And God will redeem whatever we do just as we see with the character of Solomon. Yet God invites us to prayerfully consider our words and actions to see if they honor God and if they bring peace and wholeness to the body of believers and our witness to the world.

What forces do you think are tempting to worship instead of the Lord? What defines a hero or anti-hero to you? How can we find ways to hold ourselves accountable to the teachings of the Lord? What is the danger in elevating people so high we cannot see their faults or weaknesses? Who are the people you have found to hold you accountable to your words and actions reflecting the light and love of Jesus?

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