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The Emperor's New Temple
1 Kings 3-9; Selections from Proverbs 25-27

How do you step into the shoes of a legend? That was the problem facing Solomon after his father, King David, died. While David had declined visibly in recent years, he was still the hero who had defeated the Philistines, who had brought unity to the warring tribes of Israel, and who had expanded Israel's borders so much that it was now an empire. None of that was true for young, palace-bred, Solomon, who had never led an army in his life. How could he possibly succeed in a legend's shadow?

At any rate, his first task was to make sure he kept the throne. Solomon was king – David had said so – but his older brother Adonijah was still around, carrying his claim to the throne like a banner. Most ancient kings would have dealt with this violently, making their rival disappear at once, but Solomon was not most people. He was extraordinarily patient and, more importantly, an acute observer of human nature. He did nothing to Adonijah; he just waited for Adonijah to screw up somehow.

He didn't have to wait long. Adonijah chose to work through Solomon's mother Bathsheba, because he was apparently one of those who think that working through someone else is smart. "O Queen Bathsheba, would you do something for me?" he asked.

"Say on," the queen replied.

"Could you ask the king to give me a wife?" Bathsheba waited. Adonijah was a handsome royal prince. Finding a wife shouldn't have been a problem. Adonijah went on, "I was thinking about Abishag the Shunnamite."

As many of you will recall, Abishag was the beautiful young woman who had been David's personal attendant and care-giver in his old age. A part of her job had been to share David's bed during the cold nights when he could not get warm. The Bible never says that she was either wife or concubine to David, but that surely was how the people of Jerusalem thought of her. So, Adonijah's request was basically to let him marry one of his father's women, which would have been to elevate him to his father's status. Bathsheba hid a smile.

"I'll speak to the king concerning this matter," she said.

"My son," Bathsheba said, going to Solomon. "Would you do one teensy thing for me?"

"Anything you want, mother," Solomon replied warily. His mother didn't usually talk like that.

"Just a tiny thing. Would you give Abishag the Shunnamite to your brother Adonijah as wife?"

Solomon could have laughed out loud. Was Adonijah's plan? Was he really that witless? And did he think he could manipulate Bathsheba, the master manipulator herself? Solomon schooled his features into a stern expression, checked to make sure there was an audience, then rose angrily. "Has Adonijah really demanded my father's attendant as wife? I shall *not* grant this. You may as well ask me to hand over the kingdom! This is treason! Adonijah seeks to take the throne that my father gave to me. Send for Benaiah! Adonijah shall not live this day out!"

And so it was. Benaiah the enforcer eliminated Solomon's chief rival for the throne. But that's not all. When old Joab heard that Adonijah had been executed as a traitor, he knew that he and everyone else who had supported Adonijah's claim to the throne were in danger. Joab ran to the temple to claim sanctuary. Benaiah found him. "Come away from the altar, Joab."

Joab didn't move. "Why would I make this easier for you, Benaiah? If you want to kill me, you'll have to kill me right here, before the altar of God."

Benaiah reported this to Solomon, who replied, "Well? Joab says you'll have to kill him there. I would never contradict Joab." And so ended the bloody life and career of David's commander, Joab. For those who admire Alexander the Great and Caesar and Napoleon and the like, he was surely a great leader. For the rest of us, it has to be said that he was not much of a human being, who had earned his death countless times. Eventually, his own murders caught up with him.

Solomon then sent for Abiathar, the priest who had also supported Adonijah. "Abiathar, you are a priest of God, and you and your father supported my father in his times of trial. Your life is yours, but I cannot have you in the capital any longer. Zadok will be the high priest in Jerusalem. You and your family are to go to the town of Anathoth to serve as priests to those people." Abiathar bowed, accepting his exile, and moved to the neighboring town of Anathoth.

A brief historical note here. The descendants of Zadok were to remain chief priests for almost a thousand years, up to and including the time of Jesus. The Greek word for "Zadokite" is "Sadducee." As for Abiathar, we don't really hear any more about him, but some 400 years after Abiathar's exile, in a time of national emergency, a young priest appeared from the town of Anathoth proclaiming the word of God in Jerusalem. His name was Jeremiah.

Solomon had one more detail to clear up, and he sent for the Benjaminite Shimei, the one who had taunted David when he fled from Jerusalem during Absalom's rebellion. Solomon said, "Shimei, I have called you here because on his deathbed, my father asked me kill you. I don't want to do that. But insofar as you participated in a rebellion against the throne, there must be consequences. From this day, you are confined to Jerusalem. Live your life as you choose, but if I hear of you leaving this city, for any reason, I will understand that you are choosing death. Are we clear?"

What could Shimei say but "Thank you, sir"? And once again, Solomon's reading of human nature was accurate. A few years later, a couple of Shimei's slaves ran away, and he chased them out of Jerusalem. So Benaiah had one more job, David's deathbed hit list was complete, and Solomon's throne was established and uncontested.

Up to this point scripture has given us no clear window into Solomon's character but instead has just left us to figure out what he was like by his words and actions – you know, like we have to do in real life. Our picture of Solomon so far is of an utterly ruthless man who is smart and subtle enough to achieve his ends without forcing them. But people are always more than the snapshots we take of them, so at this point the Bible offers a straightforward, and mildly surprising, new detail. The text says, "Now Solomon loved the Lord," and goes on to describe his faithful worship in all the different shrines dedicated to God. For at that time there were many different places where the Lord was worshiped in Israel. The tabernacle and the Ark were in Jerusalem, but there was a shrine at Ramah and another at Gibeon, and Solomon apparently

made the rounds, demonstrating to his people his own faithfulness to the God of the Covenant by worshiping at each shrine. And it came about one evening, when he had gone to offer sacrifice at Gibeon, that the Lord came to Solomon in a dream and said, “I am the God who made covenant with your ancestors, and with your father David. I come to offer you a gift, whatever you ask.”

In the dream, Solomon said, “My lord, you have put me over a great and diverse people. If I may ask for only one thing, then I ask for wisdom to rule them well.”

And the Lord replied, “You could have asked for wealth or for victory over your enemies, both of which would have been about you. Instead, you asked for wisdom as a king, which benefits others. Well done. I think I’ll give you all three.” At that, Solomon woke up.

It would appear that God was truly speaking in that dream, though, because Solomon had peace, became fabulously wealthy, and showed incomparable wisdom as a king. To illustrate this, we have the best-known story about Solomon. In it, two prostitutes who shared a house and who each had an infant child came before Solomon. One of the two infants had died in the night, and now the two women were each claiming that the living child was hers and the dead child belonged to the other. Solomon heard them out, then nodded gravely and said, “This seems simple enough. Bring me a sword, and I’ll just cut the baby in two and give each of you half.” One of the women nodded in agreement, but the other said, “No, don’t do that! Give the child to her if you must, but let it live!” – at which point Solomon gave the baby to that woman, the one who had been willing to give it up to spare its life. As I say, this story is included here to demonstrate Solomon’s wisdom. I’m not sure it does. I mean, it’s clever and all that, but wisdom is more than being able to pull a fast one in the courtroom.

Here’s what real wisdom looks like: Solomon set up and managed his empire with skill and resourcefulness, creating the bureaucracy necessary to maintain communication and to bring all the tribes together. He designed systems of public works and set up perimeter defenses at the borders. He cultivated good relations with his nearest neighbors, making them trading partners instead of rivals, and he made treaties with his more distant neighbors. For instance, he took the daughter of the King of Egypt as one of his wives, thus establishing peace to the south. He turned the rough-edged empire of David, held together by personal loyalty to one man, into a smooth and efficient unity. Solomon never did lead troops into battle, as his father had, but that was primarily because he was so competent a ruler that he never had to. In his free time, he studied natural science, making lists of plants and animals and describing their behavior. He also wrote songs, and then, of course, there were his sayings. The man apparently could hardly open his mouth without saying something that other people ran to write down for posterity, some of which were still being recorded and passed down centuries later.

We read from the Book of Proverbs, selections from chapters 25-27.

25 These are other proverbs of Solomon that the officials of King Hezekiah of Judah copied.

*¹³ Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest
are faithful messengers to those who send them;
they refresh the spirit of their masters.*

*¹⁴ Like clouds and wind without rain
is one who boasts of a gift never given.*

- ²⁰ *Like vinegar on a wound
is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.*
- ²⁶ *Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain
are the righteous who give way before the wicked.*
- ^{26:4} *Do not answer fools according to their folly,
or you will be a fool yourself.*
- ⁵ *Answer fools according to their folly,
or they will be wise in their own eyes.*
- ¹² *Do you see persons wise in their own eyes?
There is more hope for fools than for them.*
- ^{27:2} *Let another praise you, and not your own mouth—
a stranger, and not your own lips.*
- ¹⁴ *Whoever blesses a neighbor with a loud voice,
rising early in the morning,
will be counted as cursing.*

I like that last one. Apparently Solomon wasn't a morning person.

One of the nations nearby with which Solomon cultivated a partnership was the nation of Tyre – modern day Lebanon – which had a key resource that Israel did not: lumber. Trees in semi-arid Israel are short and knotty, but Tyre had massive trees, and Solomon wanted to build. Both to honor God and to unify the nation, Solomon wanted to build a huge national temple in Jerusalem to which all Israel would come for special days of worship. He worked out terms with Hiram, King of Tyre, for lumber and carpenters, and the work began. About four chapters of 1 Kings are devoted to the details of the temple construction. I encourage you to read those chapters if you are a student of architecture and design, or if you're having trouble sleeping some night, but we won't take time for them now. Here's what matters: When it was completed, Solomon's temple was a magnificent structure, declaring both the glory of God and the glory of Israel. Solomon summoned all the priests and all the people for a grand dedication. Animals beyond number were sacrificed to the Lord, and Solomon stood up to speak before the gathered crowds.

"O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath. You are a God of covenant faithfulness and steadfast love. Today we celebrate your covenants with us – with Abraham and with Moses and with my father David. May this temple always declare your faithfulness to the world.

"But God, today I also know that you are greater than this temple. This is a building. I made it. It is nothing. Not all the earth or skies can contain you. May this building never be thought of as the place of God. Let it rather be the place from which people seek God. When there is drought or famine in the land and we raise our prayers from this place to you, hear them O Lord. When an enemy threatens the land and we call for your help from this altar, hear our prayers, O God. And if we ever turn against you and forget your covenant and then come back to this place to confess our sins, grant us your forgiveness, O God of our fathers, God of our hope. Amen."