

Solomon's Wisdom and Reformation

So I gotta say this – the second part of today's reading is one of my least favorite in all of scripture. Among all the things Solomon did, THIS is the one the writer chose to show Solomon's wisdom? It's clever, shrewd maybe, but wise? It's always in fact seemed rather cruel to me.

One poor woman is out of her mind with grief and the other is caught in a bizarre trap. But, here it is. Proof that not everything in the Bible is uplifting. We will ultimately deal mostly with wisdom today, but it seems important to me to point out that using the loss of a child this way is troubling to me.

Today is also Reformation Sunday...the day we commemorate as the beginning of Martin Luther's reformation. It began when he hung a document listing 95 needed reforms in the church to the door of the Wittenberg castle

Wisdom is actually not a bad thing to focus on for Reformation. It's also not a bad thing to think about 10 days before the midterm election. I hope that all the candidates and voters are praying for wisdom.

We'll keep our focus on the church, but because Solomon was a king who prayed for wisdom to govern, his is a political story and we can't shy away from that.

So, what is wisdom? Commonly, it's simply the ability to use knowledge in a way that shows good judgment.

Wisdom is personified in scripture as Lady Wisdom – Sophia. She is in some sense a part of the divine and was with God at creation. Here's what Proverbs 8 says: This is Sophia speaking:

² “The LORD created me at the beginning^[a] of his work,^[b]
the first of his acts of long ago.

²³ Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

²⁴ When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.

²⁵ Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth,

²⁶ when he had not yet made earth and fields^[c]
or the world's first bits of soil.

²⁷ When he established the heavens, I was there;
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,

²⁸ when he made firm the skies above,

when he established the fountains of the deep,
²⁹ when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
³⁰ then I was beside him, like a master worker,^[d]
and I was daily his^[e] delight,
playing before him always,
³¹ playing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.

Lady Wisdom was intimately involved in the work of creation. That should fit into our definition of wisdom.

So putting that together, we could say that Solomon was praying for the ability to use his knowledge and experience to further the work of creation and fulfill God's purpose for Israel.

I'm going to say that's a pretty good definition of wisdom for all of us as Christians – the ability to use our knowledge and experience to further the work of creation and fulfill God's purpose for humanity.

So, how well did Solomon do?

First of all, Solomon is credited with writing many of the Proverbs and the book Song of Songs. He may also have written some of the Psalms. He could definitely talk the talk

And, if the mark of wisdom is to make the nation and himself fabulously wealthy, he did well. In fact, it would seem that God intended this prosperity for Solomon because God was so pleased that Solomon asked only for wisdom.

But let's go a little further into Solomon's story.

First of all, Solomon isn't just a boy here. He's at least 20.

Solomon had one older brother still alive when he took the throne, Adonijah. Adonijah felt the throne should belong to him because he was the oldest surviving son of David. But, he was outmaneuvered by Solomon and his mother Bathsheba and Solomon became king.

When Solomon became suspicious that Adonijah was still scheming to take the throne, he had his brother executed. OK, different time and place...that wasn't unusual for the times, even if it seems barbaric to us.

Solomon built a lavish temple and city. He amassed a huge amount of wealth and built a fleet of merchant ships. Israel was at its peak of glory. In his wisdom, he made alliances with the surrounding nations, and it was a time of peace. From a worldly standpoint, his wisdom did indeed make him wildly successful. And he was known throughout the region for his wisdom.

He also had 700 wives and 300 concubines... a harem of 1000 women. Was that wise? I guess it depends. From a worldly standpoint, yes. That's how he arranged some of his alliances with foreign nations...through the daughters of kings and queens. The peace Israel experienced during this time was a direct result of that.

But...those wives became a problem. They worshipped other gods and they drew Solomon away from the God of Israel. That didn't sit well with God.

God told Solomon that Israel would stay together through Solomon's reign out of God's loyalty to David. But Solomon's unfaithfulness would result in the kingdom falling apart.

Solomon also used forced labor for his construction projects and levied high taxes on ordinary people who didn't really benefit from them.

When Solomon died, a man named Jeroboam went to Solomon's son Rehoboam and said, Solomon's yoke was too heavy to bear. Between the forced labor and the high taxes, people needed a break. Jeroboam asked Rehoboam to ease up. Rehoboam refused to listen and made the yoke even heavier. As a result, Jeroboam and the ten northern tribes seceded, and the united kingdom fell apart.

So, was Solomon wise? What do you think?

I'd have to say he's a mixed bag. He has given us some great words of wisdom to live by. And he ruled the nation in a way that brought peace and prosperity.

Maybe we could say he was pretty good at the wisdom of the world. But later in scripture, in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul would say that kind of wisdom is foolishness to God...and God's wisdom, shown in the cross of Christ, looks like foolishness to the world.

The books entitled first and second Kings were written while Israel was in exile in Babylon. In many ways, they were written to show how the monarchy...the kings...failed to lead Israel to be the people God wanted them to be.

So even great Solomon in all his glory comes with a warning label.

But it's in those things that went wrong that I find some thoughts for Reformation.

One of Martin Luther's key issues with the church of his day was the sale of indulgences...people bought indulgences believing it would contribute to their salvation. The money raised from these indulgences was to go to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Since the time of the Roman Empire's conversion to Christianity, the church has had a tricky relationship with power and wealth.

And of course, Luther said salvation was through God's grace and could not be earned or bought. Are there still ways the church makes people feel unworthy of God's love and salvation unless they do certain things or live a certain way? I don't believe ours does, but there are those that do.

Is the church still sometimes too obsessed with money and finances? In what do we truly put our faith?

The political relationship between church and state now cannot be compared to Solomon's day. But there are those who say the church should have more influence over government.

Are those who say that operating from the wisdom that is exemplified by a cross...or are they operating from the wisdom that is exemplified by Solomon...accumulation of massive wealth and power for those at the top at the expense of those at the margins? That ultimately didn't work out well for Israel.

Solomon's story might be one of the most helpful in the Bible for seeing the chief characters through whom God works as the complicated mix they always are.

That's also true of us. Perhaps the single most important starting point for any reformation is to humbly recognize that we are not always right.

But we are nonetheless loved by God. And we are the ones called by God to reveal God's love and grace to the world. We are called to a wisdom that seeks to further creation and model the wisdom of the cross...a wisdom that is not about power and wealth but rather a wisdom willing to suffer with those who suffer. If every Christian in the world made that their mission, that would be a true Reformation.