

*The Story: Cooked A Degree At A Time*

*By Jason Huff*

*Ecclesiastes 12, Mark 8:34-38, 1 Kings 3:5-6,9-14; 4:25; 10:23-25; 11:4-6*

Our final Scripture readings today are selections from the book of 1 Kings. Listen now to God's Word. "At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." Solomon answered, "You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day...so give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?" The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for – both riches and honor – so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in my ways and obey my statutes and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life." ... During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree...King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart. Year after year, everyone who came brought a gift – articles of silver and gold, robes, weapons and spices, and horses and mules...as Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done."

There's nothing like reality to destroy a good sermon illustration. I was going to start this morning by talking about the conventional wisdom of how to cook a frog. If you put a frog in really hot water, it tries to jump out. But supposedly, if you turn up the heat little by little, the frog never notices. Voila! Frog soup. Sadly, a little research on the Internet proves it to be untrue. If you put a frog in cold water and start turning up the temperature, it does exactly what you'd expect to do – it tries to get out. Another sermon illustration down for the count.

It turns out the animal most likely to wind up getting itself cooked without noticing is us. Nearly half of all Americans who live to 65 will develop a form of skin cancer during their lives. The vast majority are caused by over-exposure to UV rays from the sun and tanning beds. A bad childhood sunburn may lead to skin cancer forty years later. In other words, given enough time, we're far more likely to wind up fried than the frog. Worse, we don't even know it's happening.

Unlike his dad David, Solomon doesn't have a catastrophic fall into sin. For a long time, he governs with incredible insight. But David sought forgiveness and received God's grace, while Solomon's slow descent into sin left him empty. Solomon wrote thousands of proverbs, but following those rules didn't make him godly. The distinction between David and Solomon is the difference between God being the center of your life and God being an accessory to it.

Let's recap Solomon's history. His father David was called "a man after God's own heart." He trusted God completely and showed Israel what it meant to be a godly man and a godly king. His military campaigns, in God's providence, solidified Israel as a nation. Despite his serious fall into sin that we discussed last week, David repented and found reconciliation with God. He reigned over Israel for forty years.

When Solomon ascends to the throne, he follows in his father's footsteps and seeks God's favor. God tells Solomon to ask for whatever he desires, and he asks for wisdom. God is so pleased by this request that He not only grants it, but He also gives Solomon riches and honor. Scripture tells us that he had no equal among kings in his day in terms of discernment or wealth.

Solomon uses his wisdom and his prosperity to forge alliances throughout the entire region. As he does so, he assembles all the workers and materials he needs to build a temple for God in Jerusalem. Scripture tells us that it was incredibly ornate and took seven years to build. This became the centerpiece of Solomon's reign, displaying not only God's goodness but also the immense prosperity of the kingdom. A permanent dwelling place for God among his people, hinted at in the days of Moses and longed for by David, finally became a reality.

But if visitors to Israel were awestruck by the temple, they were stunned by Solomon's intellect. He was a legend in his own day. Three books of the Bible – Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes – were written by him; some of the Psalms are his as well. Not only does he understand the workings of nature and the issues of human relationships, he also has insight into the heart of God. He realizes that this temple, this massive undertaking, cannot begin to contain God. He comprehends the meaningless nature of life without God. He is brilliant beyond compare, a scholar and a theologian who looks to have the same heart for God his father had.

So what goes wrong? Scripture tells us that he loved women. There were 1000 women in his harem – 700 princesses and 300 commoners. Most were from other nations, and as Solomon grew older, they pushed him towards their gods. Why would he turn to false gods when he had spoken with Yahweh himself? He wanted to keep his wives satisfied. These were also fertility gods – Ashtoreth was also known as Aphrodite by the Greeks, the goddess of sexuality. Solomon's heart was divided by his overwhelming desire for women, enough to worship these gods who promised more pleasure, even though their worship was an abomination to God. By the end of Solomon's life, God was so displeased that He raised up adversaries against Solomon and vowed that the unified kingdom would divide during his son's reign.

I believe that Solomon never intended to become an idolater. I don't think he intended to forsake God. When Solomon is enticed to worship other gods, the phrase used to describe what happens is difficult to translate well into English because it's a Hebrew idiom; translations say that his heart wasn't fully devoted to God or wasn't perfect with God or wasn't true to God. But in Hebrew, it says "his heart was not at *shalom* with God." The word *shalom* in Hebrew means completeness, safety, and perfection – in one word, peace. Solomon was no longer at peace with God. His heart was incomplete when he ran after other gods. It's not he forgot the LORD entirely. It's that his heart was divided. His heart didn't fully belong to God anymore.

Solomon was an incredibly smart man. How could he let such a foolish thing happen? It goes back to the principle we started with this morning. How long is too long before a little tan becomes a burn? It begins the moment you step out into the sun uncovered. And so it was with Solomon. His wives, all 700, were princesses. They were all royalty. Solomon consolidated his power and forged alliances by making treaties and sealing them by marrying the daughters of subordinate kings. It seems like a wise move – a lesser king isn't likely to attack you if his daughter lives in your palace! But it gets wildly out of control. Solomon's love for women overpowers him. To have 700 royal wives, Solomon had to have made treaties with every last local tribe. And the 300 concubines weren't royalty. Solomon brought them into his harem because he wanted to. His desire for women overshadowed his wisdom.

Not only that, it overshadowed his desire for God. Solomon wrote thirty-one chapters of parables about godly living, who fathomed more than most the mysteries of God, who prayed earnestly to God. But his heart for God was chipped away a marriage at a time. The truth is, Solomon served foreign gods because of his wives, false idols that could not save him or defend him. But his biggest idol was the harem he clung to rather than God.

John Calvin, a key leader of the Reformation, said, "The human heart is a factory of idols. Everyone of us is, from his mother's womb, expert in inventing idols." Calvin also said, "The evil in our desire typically does not lie in what we want, *but that we want it too much.*" That's Solomon's problem. There's nothing wrong in his desire to be loved, to have a satisfying marriage. Solomon writes, "Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love." He wrote about the wonders of married love in explicit detail in Song of Songs. There wasn't even a law in his era forbidding multiple wives. But Solomon was not content. He needed more, always more, constantly more, more women, more pleasure, more. And his heart towards God grew dark and distant. By the time he writes Ecclesiastes, everything seems meaningless.

If the wisest man who ever lived fell into the trap of the idol factory, we can expect to do no better, and we don't. The slow fade from a deep love of God to apathy or antipathy towards Him can be motivated by any number of idols in our lives. Often, these idols aren't in and of themselves evil; they may in fact be good or noble. But when they become the center of our lives, they push God away from His rightful place on the throne of our hearts.

If you come over to our house, you may see several cases of CDs and DVDs in a cabinet. These days, I'm lucky to buy 5 discs a year. But many years ago, music and movies were my life. Before I considered becoming a pastor, I got a Bachelors Degree in Mass Communications to work in Christian radio. I dove headlong into Christian music and became an expert in it. As it turns out, you can't support a family working in Christian radio. But my desire for music never decreased. I was sure it was a good thing because it was all about Christ. I convinced myself I had to be up on the latest movies and music so I could talk about them intelligently. But it got to a point where I was angry because even though we both had decent jobs, we weren't making enough money to "keep up." I had begun to substitute things, Christian music, DVDs, CDs, for my love of Christ Himself. They were my idol. What I found was that I couldn't rid myself of it. God had to release me from it. These days, I still love music and movies. But the older I get, the more they fade into the rear view mirror. They're fine, entertaining, even helpful to my Christian walk. But they are nothing in comparison to my relationship with Christ.

Anything can become an idol, and it usually isn't a sinful thing in and of itself. For men, it's often sports; you live to watch the games on the weekend or to get out on the court or the course. For some of us, food is an idol; we live to eat. Others of us have made an idol of the Internet, spending hours on Facebook or Twitter or playing games. I mentioned entertainment before, but some of us make an idol out of work. A lot of us after 9/11 became news junkies. Money, power, security, even the desire to simply be noticed and loved – all of them can become idols. When we really understand the concept of idolatry, we see how all of us are guilty of it.

So what's the difference between enjoying something for what it is and making an idol out of it? It has to do with how you spend your time and your thoughts. For example, sports aren't an idol for me. Baseball is my favorite sport to watch, and yet I don't really care if I see a single game every summer. I enjoy it, I appreciate the talents God has given the players...but then it's done and out of my head. But if you memorize stats and have season passes and schedule your life around games, you've got an idol. Or take television. There may be no one show that you feel like you have to watch every time it's on...but if you need the TV to be on when you're home, if you spend most every evening tuned in to something, maybe it's an idol.

It's hard to pin down our idols. There may not be any one thing that grips your heart; maybe you're distracted by many different things. But our attitude toward God can help us see if we've got an idolatry problem. Let me take you through some questions that help us examine the state of our hearts with God. Do I love coming to church every Sunday and wish it would never end? Do I wish there were services Sunday nights and Wednesdays and every other night? Do I crave learning more about God? Or does it matter to me if I make it to church just once or twice a month? Do I come on Sundays out of obligation and wish everything would be done in forty-five minutes? Can I worship with the songs I like *and* the songs I don't like because I realize my worship is to honor God and not to please myself? Do I pray to get on with the work of the day, or do I pray realizing that my time with God *is* the real work of my day? Do I spend time each day in God's Word, or is it something I intend to get around to someday? Do I give more than a tithe and wish I had more money to give to God's work? Or do I feel like God should be grateful with the three or four percent I give? Do I joyfully serve in the areas where God has given me talents, or do I feel like I've done my part and it's somebody else's turn now? Do I give God the abundance of my time and my thoughts and my love?

None of us can answer those questions perfectly all the time. There are many different possibilities why not. One possibility is that you've never experienced the real presence of God in your life. Maybe you grew up in the church and you come each week because it's your duty, but not because you have a living, active relationship with Him. Maybe you just haven't come to the point in your life where you've said, "God, I'm going to live my life in faith and believe in your son Jesus for salvation." That's one possibility.

Another is that you've committed your life to Christ and you've simply never been confronted with these things. Nobody ever taught you how Bible reading is a really good way to grow in Christ, or you've never thought about how you might cultivate your faith. A third possibility is that you need to mature in faith. For example, you may love Bible study but not do so well at giving. You might need to learn how to joyfully worship rather than seeing it as a burden. You simply need to continue forward in your walk with Christ, as we all do.

The last possibility is the issue of Solomon – you had the joy of God at one point in your life, but as Jesus said in his parable, “the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke out the word [of God], making it unfruitful.” We haven’t been mindful of our time out in the sun, following our own desires rather than God’s will, and unless things change, we’re going to wind up burned. Our idols have gotten in the way.

There are four possibilities why our hearts aren’t at *shalom* with God, but there’s one answer to them all. The great church father Augustine composed a prayer that puts the answer simply. He wrote, “Almighty God...you have made us for yourself, so that our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” Thinker Blaise Pascal put it another way – “There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.”

If these two statements are true, then the only way to find that peace, that *shalom*, that wholeness we long for, is to turn to God completely. Give yourself over to Him, including whatever it is you desire in this world. Trust in Him. No matter if this is the first time you’ve trusted Jesus or simply your daily act of rejecting sin and following our Master, God will be faithful and lead you out of the idol factory into the factory of His Holy Spirit, who will manufacture in you the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and self-control that mark you as His son or daughter. You can’t do it yourself...but God can and He will when you come to Him in faith. And when you ask Him to move in you so that you will enjoy being in His presence, among His people, worshipping Him, serving others on His behalf, giving of yourself and your wealth to revere Him, He will not only do it, He can make it a pleasure. He can transform you so that your constant desire is to honor Him and love Him and experience the joy of His presence and make Him known to those around you.

This is the real message that we see in the story of David’s reconciliation with God and Solomon’s slow fade from grace. We need a Savior. As Jesus said in our reading from Mark today, it does us no good to gain everything here on earth but miss out on eternity with God. The smartest, wisest, most God-dedicated people in the world cannot please God on their own or merit His favor or earn eternal life. We need Jesus Christ. We need Him to save us from ourselves, because even the very best of us isn’t close to the perfection God requires. But through Him and His saving grace in our lives, we receive the free gift of eternal life. We can become faithful followers of God, not because of anything we’ve done, but by His mercy. Solomon let the water around him come to a boil while he was worried about his desires, and it cost him everything. Don’t let that happen to you. Turn to God today, and He will bring you the joy of salvation and the desire to know Him more and more.