

Solomon's Dream

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Date: 07 January 2018

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[0 : 0 0] I guess that by now you have heard a number of New Year sermons and I think I can say with confidence that this will probably be the last for this year.

And nonetheless, it's important to mark the occasion and we do so by this evening coming to the Old Testament and by recognizing the new beginning that there was in the chapter that we read in First Kings and chapter 3. Solomon's reign or the beginning of Solomon's reign, it represented a new beginning for the people of Israel. They had spent many years under the authority of David and now they look to a very different rule under Solomon, his son, and they had no idea to what extent Solomon would represent or reflect what his father David had done. So for them it was a new beginning full of uncertainties and challenges, but it was also a new beginning for Solomon himself and despite the excitement of a new king and a new coronation, there were the dangers and the uncertainties that faced him. He knew that things were that being a king over Israel was not going to be easy with much power comes with great responsibility. David had set a great precedent in Israel and how was Solomon going to faithfully follow that reign. I want you to notice first of all the way in which Solomon enters into this new era. He does so in worship and worship for the people of the Old Testament, of course, it took the form of sacrifice. It always did and the reason for that is really important. I'll go into that in a moment. You'll notice that being the king of Israel,

Solomon's sacrifice didn't consist simply in one animal, but a thousand. The whole, the chapter begins with him sacrificing a thousand animals, not only on this occasion, this was his regular practice. Now there's a wrong way and a right way of understanding this. The wrong way is to imagine that Solomon thought that he could win his way into God's favour the more animals he killed and the more animals he sacrificed. That wasn't the way it worked at all. The right way of understanding it is to recognize the extravagance of Solomon's worship. It almost seems ridiculous, doesn't it, to put to death a thousand animals for the sake of a worship service. And yet for Solomon, this great slaughter, it was what God meant to him because sacrifice was the provision that God had made for the removal of sin. The New Testament puts it this way, without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness. In the Old Testament the blood was the blood of the animal, but every sacrifice in the Old Testament looked forward to the death of Jesus, when Jesus would give himself as the once-for-all sacrifice that truly removes all our sin. And so this is the Old Testament, in Old Testament language, Solomon's way of accepting God's provision for the removal of sin because there was no other way of coming close to God. There is no other way of coming close to God. There is no other way of being reconciled to God than taking, accepting the death of Jesus as the payment for our sin, which was what sacrifice was all about. And this was

Solomon's extravagant way of recognizing how great God's love and his forgiveness and his mercy was for Israel. The thousand animals reflected the extent to which Solomon wanted to reflect the extravagance of God. I love you a thousand times. That's what Solomon was saying.

That's what worship was for Solomon, and that's what I hope it will be for me also and for you. Worship is when we come close to God and express on the basis of what Jesus has done for us, what he means to us, and how can it be anything other than extravagant in our expressions and where our hearts are, in our focus and in our concentration and in every element of our worship.

[5 : 11] Let's make this a year when our worship reflects what is in our heart, the love that is focused on the Lord Jesus Christ and let this and every other Bible-believing church be a place where God's people meet wholeheartedly, giving themselves to the Lord in response to what he has done for us. Solomon's worship spoke. It was a tremendous message to everyone of what God meant to him and what God meant to the people of Israel. But this sacrifice, it meant it allowed Solomon to come into communion with God, putting aside for a moment whether this was a dream or otherwise.

This was, it was a dream that in the Old Testament and Bible times, very often God chose to speak to his people by way of dreams. But the important thing here is not the means or the time, the important thing here is that this is a conversation between God and Solomon. It is a personal communion between Solomon and God in which God approaches him and in which Solomon answers God.

And that's our great privilege as well. There is no difference between the kind of conversation that Solomon had with God here in this chapter and the conversation that each one of us in Jesus Christ is able to have. What was it the apostle Paul says? That God has given us access into this grace wherein we stand. This is prayer and prayer is this kind of personal communion, this conversation in which we can listen to God and in which we can pour our heart out to him honestly and forthrightly. He knows our needs before we ask. And so let this be a year when we make use of God's provision for us in which we come and we worship God with all our heart and in which we know the greatness, the preciousness of personal communion with God. What a privilege we have to be able to know God face to face. In the Old Testament it was Moses that had that reputation of knowing God face to face. We have that same privilege through the Lord Jesus Christ.

We can know him face to face and we can come and we can converse with him. Now here's what God said to Solomon and it's the most extraordinary statement isn't it? He came to him at night and he spoke to him and this is what he said in verse 5. At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream and God said, ask what I shall give you. Now like I said with the sacrifice there's a wrong way of understanding it and there's a right way of understanding it. Same with verse 5. When God says to him, ask whatever I shall give you, there's a wrong way and there's a right way of understanding it. The wrong way is to think of God as some kind of genie giving Solomon three wishes or even one wish. That's not the way it worked. That's not what this is all about. This is not about God saying to Solomon, just tell me what your dreams are. Tell me what you want self-centeredly or selfishly for yourself. In actual fact if you carefully read this again, this is not about Solomon.

This is about God. Ask what I, the operative word in this conversation is not Solomon. It's I, it's God. And when God asks him to ask whatever he should give him, he's not asking him to think of any kind of fantastic dream or fantastic ambition he might personally have. He's asking him to focus on God and God's glory, on the being of God, on the reality and the presence of God. He's asking Solomon to focus on what he is now solemnly undertaking, the kingship of his chosen people, Israel. And he's asking Solomon to ask him what he, whatever he feels that he needs or wants in connection with that. But there's a very interesting question here, isn't there? When God, this challenge if you want to call it that way, ask what I shall give you. I know that Solomon's position was very unique and we're not to see ourselves as many solomons in any way. And yet there is a similarity, isn't there, between what God asks Solomon here and what Jesus says in the New Testament.

[10 : 36] What is he says in Matthew chapter 7 and verse 7, ask and it shall be given to you. And then again in John chapter 16 and verse 23, truly, truly Jesus says, whatever you ask of my Father in my name, He will give it to you. No, that's not a challenge to exploit our selfishness. That's the way you understand it. You're on the wrong road. But what it is, is a declaration of the generosity of God.

It's a declaration of the power of God and His willingness to be asked and His willingness to do for His people more than they can ask or even think. It's a declaration of His love for His people. And it's a reminder to us of our access to Him that we are able to ask, said Jesus, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, He will give it to you. So, what are we asking for at the beginning of 2018? Or is it safe to put it like this way? We are what we ask God for. We are what we ask God for. What we ask God for, it establishes our priorities, establishes the kind of people that we are, what we think are important, who we think are important, who we're concerned about, and to what extent we are concerned about the glory of God or my personal advancement. What was it John the Baptist said? He must increase and I must decrease.

Is that the way that we are going into 2018 asking God but asking Him for what He wants to give us?

Because that's what it's all about. Now, very briefly, I want us to look at four things in what, how Solomon responds to this and in what, how he comes back to God. Four things, very briefly, which I think serve as a pattern for the way in which we might go into a new beginning and in which we might face the challenges that a new year might bring us. First of all, I want us to notice that he thanks God for what God has done in the past, God's provision for him. Verse 6, Solomon said, You have shown great and steadfast love to Your servant, my Father David, because he walked before You in faithfulness and in righteousness and in uprightness of heart towards You and You have kept for him this great. Now, look at that word again, second time that he uses the same word, steadfast love and have given him a son to sit on his throne to this day.

So he's thanking God for his provision in the past. Now, on one level, of course, it's only right for anyone to thank someone who has given something to him or her. But this is not simple thankfulness. I'm not saying that we should diminish in any way the importance of thankfulness to God. Every time we come together, it ought to be coming together in thankfulness.

[14 : 16] We ought to be continually remembering what God, in fact, the Bible tells us, consider what great things God has done for us. It's dishonoring to God to fail to do so. And yet there's a special focus in what Solomon is saying here on God's special faithfulness, what he calls his steadfast love. There's a really important Hebrew word that is used here. I'm not in the habit of quoting Hebrew words. I'm not a Hebrew scholar, but there is one. There are one or two Hebrew words that are really important. Important enough to mention in one of them is this one. And it's the words that's translated steadfast love. It's the word Hezad. If you remember nothing else, then remember this in Hebrew, Hezad, because it's one of the key words in the Old Testament. It's a word that describes not just the power of God, not just the greatness of God or the holiness of God, but it describes how He extraordinarily set His love on His people Israel and bound Himself in love towards the people Israel, and He took them through thick and thin, through all kinds of dangers and trials and all kinds of experiences all the way through thousands of years of history, and He never separated Himself once from them, because He had made a promise to Abraham in

Genesis chapter 12 that He would be His God and that they would be His people forever. That was His promise. And God stuck to that promise. And what that meant was that if you were in Israel, you knew you were in special relationship with God, even though they strayed from time to time, they sinned from time to time. God's grace was greater than that sin. And God's grace meant that He was going to draw them back into a right relationship with Him. He, where they were unfaithful, He would remain faithful. And it is exactly the same relationship that we stand tonight in Jesus Christ, where He has made a promise to us, and He will never change that promise. He will never renege on that promise, because it has been ratified and verified and secured in the death of Jesus Christ. Nothing, says Paul, if I can put it in his way, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. So we go into a new year, secure in the love that will not let us go, the love that has expressed itself, and Paul's words here in this, the love of God demonstrated to us that in that Christ died for the ungodly. That's as you and I, we were ungodly, and yet Jesus died for us in all our shame and darkness. He drew us into His kingdom, and He changed our lives, and that's what He promises to do for everyone who trusts and who comes to discover Him in the Lord Jesus Christ. It's a love that will not let us go, and Solomon was able to lay hold on that love, and he knew that whatever lay ahead of him, whatever changes that there might be, whatever difficulties that there might be, he stood in that love that was completely unique in which he was able to call God his God, and he was able to know that he was God's child, his beloved child. When Paul prays for the people of Ephesus, he prays this that they would, their eyes would be open, that they would come to know this love more and more, and I would hope that at the beginning of this year that we too would want to come to discover more and more of the steadfastness and the greatness and the glory of God's love and His grace towards us. Behold, says John, what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us that we should be called children of God. We have every right to call Him Father this evening. So that's the first thing. He reflects, he gives thanks for God's steadfast love towards Him, but then secondly, he recognizes God's providence in bringing Him to where He is.

Verse 7, And now, oh Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my Father. Now at first sight, this might be just Solomon here is Solomon. He's now the king and he's just kind of looking in the mirror and saying, well, I've made it. And here I am now taking place, the place that my Father had. I'm here in all my robes and with my crown and I'm going to do the best I can. But that's not what this verse means at all. This verse once again is not about Solomon's grandeur or greatness. It's about God's greatness and particularly God's providence. Now what do we mean by that? This is really important because it operates in every era. It operates in the New Testament and here in Edinburgh today, amongst God's people, we rely on God's providence from day to day. Here's what it means. It means that our lives are not a random series of meaningless events that take place, but it means that our lives are ordered and governed by God.

It means that God guides every single event. The events in the past, the events in the present and the events in the future are all governed in a mysterious way, ways that we do not understand by God in order for him to be glorified in us and in order for us to carry out his will, providence.

It doesn't always operate the way we expect it to. It often operates in the ways that are opposite to our expectation, where God seems to allow things to take place that appear to be hurtful and painful, things that we don't understand.

[21 : 31] And yet the Bible assures us that all things work together for good, all things, not just some things, not just the things that we understand, but all things work together for good to those who love God and who are called according to his purpose. Now you might say, well, of course Solomon's going to say that because he's the king after all. I mean, it doesn't get better than that, does it? I mean, he's the king of Israel. He's got all the riches at his disposal.

He's got more gold than he knows what to do with. He can do anything he wants. He can give any order to do anything he wants. And of course, if I had that kind of power, it's, that's not the way it worked.

That's not the way it worked for Solomon at all. You might think that on the surface, but in actual fact, Solomon's life and his past wasn't very tidy. And it wasn't very secure on a human level.

There were things in Solomon's past that actually shed light upon this, and that's why it's important to know the context of the story. Yesterday, I was persuaded to go and see the last Jedi, and by a 11-year-old friend of mine who wanted to go and see it. And we're sat there in the cinemad, all of a sudden you're hit with these massive spaceships, and they're all blowing each other up. And then there's people of all shapes and sizes and ages, and they're lightsabers and fights and some of their deaths and lives. And you work out within about half an hour who the good guys are, and so you root for the good guys, and you work out also who the bad guys are. But there are some twists in the story. I better not say too much just to give anything away. But there are twists in the story as well. You're trying to work out what the twists are. But what I'm trying to say is you end up, you enjoy the movie even though you don't know anything about it.

But if you really want to get into the nuances, you have to know the background, which I don't, but it was explained to me afterwards by my 11-year-old expert on Star Wars.

[24 : 01] You have to know the background, and it's the same with this. If you don't know the background here, you might just think, well, this is the right thing for Solomon to say. But if you know the background, you discover actually there are twists to the story, like for example, the circumstances of Solomon's birth. They were not easy. They weren't clean. We would expect someone who's going to be destined for the throne to have a clean track record. But he doesn't have a clean track record. Now, this wasn't his fault. His father and mother, they started off their relationship in a sinful manner. It was an adulterous relationship, and that would have caused all kinds of rumour and gossip so that when Solomon was born, you would have had people saying, ah, yeah, well, you know all about them, their history and what happened. And it would have been a resurrection of all the rumour that would have been going around when David and Bathsheba first first got together. And so the whole of his life, there would have been a sort of cloud.

There would have been suspicion. Besides, Solomon wasn't the natural heir to the throne. He wasn't the oldest member in the family. And so there were people against him. Adonijah had already tried to take the throne. So it wasn't an easy thing for him at all. It wasn't tidy. And perhaps, and this is where it's so relevant, perhaps it might have been tempting for Solomon to say to God, why has my life been so complicated? Would it not be so much easier had I had a tidy background without these questions being asked and without all this awkwardness? But that's not the way life is, is it?

Many people bear the scars of events and a past that perhaps they're not responsible for. And perhaps we're tempted to say to God, God, why have you not made my life, if I was, if I didn't have this in my past, then things would be so different and so much easier.

And that's what God says to us. You are who you are, because you are where I want you to be. With all the weaknesses and the past and all the scars and all your deficiencies and all your disabilities. So at the end of the day, all of us have disabilities, don't we? All of us.

The marvelous thing is this, God's providence means that God weaves it all in to produce what he wants, and that's what's important. It's not what we want, it's what he wants that's important. God somehow in his own mysterious way, he weaves it all together because he has a plan, he has a purpose for us. Now look at what happens, and this is why I wanted to read verse 16, because immediately, almost immediately when Solomon becomes king, he's confronted with the most bizarre situation, two prostitutes. On the outskirts, the margins of society. The first thing that strikes you about these two women, you can read the story for yourself, it's incredible. You read the story for yourself afterwards. The first thing that strikes you is, how come they got access to the king that they did? And I can't help wondering whether

[27 : 58] Solomon had that sympathy for them because he himself had such a messy past. He had such a messy background. This was God's way of giving him the readiness and the preparation for facing some of the most bizarre situations that you can think of. The time is going, but can I just say this, as a Christian, you can say, you can go one better than saying, well, I am where I am tonight. No, no, you can go one better than that, and say, I am where I am because God wants me to be here, and God wants me to be the person I am. He doesn't want me to be anyone else. He doesn't want me to be anywhere else right now. I am what I am because God has brought me to this place. Very quickly, number three, he acknowledges total ignorance in his profession. Verse seven, he says, I am but a little child. I do not know how to come in or go out, and your servant is in the midst of your people who you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. Now, none of us likes to confess his ignorance, do we? There's something that just goes against our pride. You don't go to a job interview, and when you're asked, well, how much do you know? How much can you, how much knowledge can you bring to contribute to this company? You would never say, well, I actually don't know anything. Well, you wouldn't have much chance of getting a job, would you? Neither do we expect it of our rulers and presidents and kings that they don't say. I mean, this is hardly, this is hardly stable genius, is it? This is a man who is talking to God, and when we talk to God, when we know what it is to talk to God, we see ourselves in contrast to his greatness. And yet again, this is such an important place to be brought back to, time and again, where we're brought to see our own nothingness. And you know why? Because ignorance is as good a place for God to start as any, and God can do anything with a man or a woman who realizes his own nothingness. He's done it. The Bible is littered with men and women who came to realize their own ignorance and nothingness, and these were the people that God used. But what was important to Solomon was not his knowledge or his skill or his abilities, but what was important to Solomon was the preciousness of the people of Israel. And he just felt that he was so incapable of fulfilling what God was asking him to do with his precious people. Now the people of Israel equate to the church in the New Testament, and I believe we're being asked here, how important is the church to you? How important is God's kingdom, the place where we come together to worship, and where we come together to hear his word? And then lastly, he asks for wisdom to govern, to wisdom to govern. He says this, give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people that I may discern between good and evil for who is able to govern this, your great people. Now I know that wisdom is a theme that was taken over the course of the last few months in this congregation, and if you're a regular here, you'll have heard the series on Proverbs.

So I'm not going to redefine wisdom. I'm not going to reinvent the wheel, but it's so important to go back and to remind ourselves of what biblical wisdom is. What was it? I think it was Cori that said when he was defining wisdom, he said, wisdom is the ability to do what is good and right, where there are no rules telling you what to do. What he meant by that, and I think he explained it at the time, was when you're confronted with a commandment, you shall not kill. Well, that's a no-brainer. You just, you don't kill. That's easy, no problem. You shall not steal. You don't steal.

But life's not like that, is it? Life is full of the most complicated issues that require the discernment and the ability to make judgments and to act in a way that is in keeping with the way that God wants us to act. And that's why all of us, me included, we need to, at the very beginning of this year, ask for that discernment, a discernment which is exemplified for us supremely tonight in the Lord Jesus Christ. When God asks us what can I give you tonight, I hope my prayer is, I want to be more like Jesus. I want to face every situation, the way that He would face it. I want to make the judgments, now I know I'm going to fail, but my failure will come from my own foolishness. But God will answer that prayer. That's a prayer that God will answer. Make me more like the Lord Jesus Christ. Is that what you really want? Because that's the prayer that God takes pleasure in. We read here that God was pleased with Solomon's prayer.

And that's what it's all about, isn't it? For God to be pleased with us. He already is in the Lord Jesus Christ. He's pleased with all His people because He sees us as united and identified with Jesus. We pray that our lives will reflect who we are and our relationship to Him for His glory every day. Let's pray together. Our Father in heaven, we pray that we too will have that wisdom to discern the times around us to act in such a manner that will reflect the patience and the godliness and the biblical instruction that you have given to us. Lord, give us a greater understanding of your word and how your word guides us as to how we are to conduct ourselves in the days that lie ahead. We thank you that you can do anything with men and women who are prepared to admit their own weakness, their own nothingness. May we be those men and women this evening.

We pray that your church will be precious to us and that we too will rediscover the joy and the importance of worship and communion with God. We pray that you will personally take us into the days that lie ahead in your own love and in your own grace for we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.