

HAVE YOU ANY FOREIGN WIVES?

Last week we read in First Kings, chapter eight, about the dedication of the First Temple in Jerusalem. Hopes were high, hearts were brave, and we could feel the devotion of young King Solomon as he prayed on that great occasion:

“The LORD our God be with us, as he was with our fathers. May he never leave us or forsake us; that he may incline our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, his statutes, and his ordinances, which he commanded our fathers. Let these words of mine, with which I have made supplication before the LORD, be near to the LORD our God day and night, and may he maintain the cause of his servant, and the cause of his people Israel, as each day requires; that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; there is no other. Let your hearts therefore be wholly true to the LORD our God, walking in his statutes and keeping his commandments, as at this day.”

How, then, can we understand what we read today? Can this possibly be the same King Solomon? This sated, faithless abomination of a king who models scorn for the Covenant and mocks God for all to see – leading Israel into idolatry, apostasy, and ruin?

What excuses do we hear? What reasons does Solomon have for abandoning the Covenant he seemed so eager for the whole nation to keep when the temple was first dedicated? I can imagine scenarios that explain the pressures and lies that confused and undid poor Judas. But I have a hard time understanding or explaining this Judas of the Old Testament. Damn you, King Solomon – you make me want to believe in the fires of Hell!

Of course, there is always redemption if we repent. God can heal and restore anything we mess up, if we see our errors – hate them, turn from them, repent/return in humble willingness to be forgiven and restored – and move back to faithfulness and obedience. If Solomon had repented, that also would have become a guiding light to the nation, and to the kings that followed him. The nation could have moved toward recovery – torn down the idols and the heathen temples – and moved back to its calling as the Chosen Messengers, the People of God. But we hear no hint of remorse or repentance from Solomon. We only hear the broken heart of God, as he sees his plans and purposes shattered and abandoned one more time by the very

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people he loves and wants to help. And then we can feel God trying to cut back anger and retaliation. “*For the sake of David, for the sake of Jerusalem ...*” we will wait for another to arise.

Maybe *you* are able to stay objective and unmoved by such drama. I have never been able to separate myself from the history and tradition that everything we cherish and value comes from. Only, I could not rage at Solomon if I did not also identify – if I did not see myself there reflected. I could not be so sorry for Israel and Jerusalem if I did not see reflected there the apostasy and faithlessness of my own culture and country and denomination. I can pretend to be aghast that Solomon would claim uncompromising loyalty and devotion to his God and to the Covenant and, a few short years later, act and live as if he had never heard of either one. But I am not as surprised as I pretend. I have broken promises and covenants I swore I would never break. I have watched it happening all around me for many years now.

I live here in this church – in a special faith family – where I have regard and respect beyond description for the quality of life and faithfulness I see all around me. Yet even here we make mistakes and must continually repent and return. Even here, there are those among us who do not seem to take very much of our faith or our purpose to heart. And outside the special faith communities like ours, the contrast is far greater. Not a very high percentage of our population thinks, prays, or plans for faithful living. Not a high percentage of our population rises each morning with a conscious and sincere intention to love and serve God in all that they do and say. I *could* be wrong. But this time, you know I am not. How I wish I were.

The reason the world is a broken place – filled with fear and alienation – is because its people do not seriously love or serve God. We are filled with our own and each other’s agendas, and therefore God cannot rule without taking away our free will. This, God will not do. God always has and always will insist that the choices we make about who we love and who we serve are *our* choices. So Solomon rules over Israel for forty years. He will be the last king to rule over a united Israel. And God never makes Solomon behave. Does God ever make any king behave? Has God ever made any of our leaders behave? Does God ever make any of *us* behave?

How do we keep talking ourselves out of loyalty and devotion to God and our Covenants? Why is Solomon’s story so much like our own? Do we think God is asleep? Do we imagine God does not care?

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Do we think religion is childish, or irrelevant? Do we imagine that others will “mind the store” and prevent very much damage from taking place, while we go off on little vacations from our allegiance and devotion? What is it? That all the rules are right, but they don’t apply to us – if we are careful not to get caught? Is this our true belief? That if we don’t get caught, we don’t have to live with what we do or with who we are?

Never mind. That was just a little tirade off on the side. Scolding ourselves or each other never seems to help, at least not for long. I still want to understand. Solomon’s father, David, was one of the greatest warriors of all time. David united the kingdom and expanded the borders from Egypt to the Euphrates River in the north. He did so with unbelievable military skill. From the day he fought Goliath to the last conflict with a neighbor nation, David never lost a battle. He made some bad mistakes, but David was fiercely loyal to Yahweh.

Solomon, as his name implies, seemed to have decided that he could make the nation even stronger as a man of “peace.” Solomon was a great builder, he loved culture, and as far as we know he never went to war. His trade caravans and merchant ships were the envy of the known world. Solomon’s strategy was to make peace treaties with all the nations around him. To seal these treaties, he married the daughters of every king and chieftain he could find. So he ended up with seven hundred wives. But there is always a difference between making peace and *keeping* the peace. Most men cannot keep one woman happy; try seven hundred.

If a wife is your treaty with a neighboring people and she does not feel honored or respected, how good is the treaty? The women Solomon married were not converting to Judaism. Solomon brought them to Jerusalem, but soon, in order to keep the treaties strong, he was building shrines to the gods they worshipped. He allowed his wives and their entourages to worship according to their traditions – right in the city of Jerusalem. Later on, to show respect, he even worshipped with them.

What Solomon did for one wife, he ended up needing to do for the other wives. Can we imagine? So to “keep the peace,” Solomon was breaking the Covenant to smithereens: first by marrying foreign women against the law of Torah, and second by bringing the worship of Moloch, Baal, Dagon, and endless other foreign gods right into the heart of the Jewish capitol.

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Solomon was the ultra “politically correct” sage of his time. (“*There is nothing new under the sun.*” (Ecclesiastes 1:9)) In the end, Solomon did not bring peace or prosperity; he merely weakened Judaism until it no longer had the power to represent God’s WAY to anybody – until it no longer had the power to even survive. How very reminiscent of many mainline churches in our own time.

We do not have to downplay or abandon our own faith – our own beliefs and values – to be respectful of others. We do not have to stop worshipping God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength in order to recognize the value and worth of other humans who do not agree with us. We do not have to be apostate or faithless ourselves in order to protect the rights of others. But that is a message we never seem to hear very clearly in our world. What we hear is that either we must abandon our own religion in order to be nice to others, or we must be faithful and true to our own religion and destroy all the others. The truth is, the only reason for tolerance is so that all of us may stay true to what we really believe. Today our world is trying to sell a brand of “tolerance” in which nobody stays true to anything.

Solomon created a pluralistic society, where everybody was included. Judaism no longer mattered. Including everybody and keeping the peace mattered. But the Kingdom went purposeless, and the price tag for pleasing everybody went higher and higher – until Solomon enslaved half the population and overtaxed the rest to pay his bills. Solomon married foreign wives to make peace treaties with the kings of the nations all around him, but then he angered more and more of them by cheating them in deals he made to try to keep up with the rising costs of pleasing all the gods, purposes, and desires of all his foreign wives. The nation split in a terrible civil war the moment Solomon died – a civil war from which it never recovered. Do we think apostasy is *new*? Are we surprised that anybody would try to bring peace by pleasing everybody?

Our current culture abhors the notion that anybody might think they are right about anything. Are you ever encouraged to stand firm, to hold the line, to claim your truth without compromise? Anathema! To be noble and brave is to be wishy-washy, inclusive, endlessly tolerant, always cooperative. After all, who really knows what is right or true? One opinion is as good as another. And all paths lead to God, no matter how much they meander or what their true goals and values are.

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How many churches in our time are so busy being pluralistic, politically correct, welcoming of everyone, eager to fight for justice and peace (not in their own hearts, of course, but “out there somewhere”) that they have no time left for Jesus, for daily prayer, for obedience to the Holy Spirit – no time left over for loving God? Jesus cannot lead if His people will not listen and if they will not follow. “The church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord,” and that foundation is being eroded away because we keep marrying foreign wives. It is hard to keep up with all that our foreign wives want from us. No time even for a Sabbath rest.

So can we all sense where this is going? This is going to be a “Don’t get careless” sermon. “*You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve... You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind ...*” (Luke 4:8; 10:27) Stop being pluralistic and wishy-washy, and return to true religion – where you know that you are right and everyone else is wrong. Wait ... are there no alternatives? Is there no road – no WAY – that does not lead us from the frying pan into the fire? The Old Covenant is wonderful in its purpose and beautiful in its design. But nobody ever takes it seriously without getting more and more judgmental of others. And nobody concentrates on being “righteous” without getting harder and harder on themselves. It is the unintended side effect of all our former definitions of “righteousness.”

So maybe this will still end up being a “Don’t get careless” sermon. But what if we shift from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant? If we do not want to get careless with the *Old* Covenant, we renew our loyalty and our promises to live by the rules and precepts of the Old Covenant. We examine our behavior and reaffirm our codes of morality: to be honest and fair in all our dealings with others; to not steal or covet or live by lust or greed; and so on.

But the New Covenant is personal and relational. It is not just some objective participation in a structural organization or a belief system that exists in the outer world we live in.

What would it mean if we did not get careless with the *New* Covenant? That is a startling concept, and it draws us into very different terrain. I am convinced that most of Christendom is still trying to picture some kind of smooth transition in which we can move from the Old Covenant into the New Covenant: If the death and resurrection of Jesus reconciles us to God, we will move from death

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to life, but we will still end up “righteous” according to our old definitions of righteousness. That is, we will still be acceptable in the way the people who keep the rules have always been acceptable. Such righteousness is still defined as it has always been defined, but we will “get there” by grace instead of by our own discipline or determination. How are we doing so far with this smooth and lovely compromise? Jesus said the tax-collectors and harlots were going into the Kingdom ahead of the Pharisees. He wants nothing to do with the righteous. It is the sick who need a physician, He said. And He announced that He has come for the sinners.

The Gospel has always been “too hot to handle,” but many have concluded that the Apostle Paul was better at tracking it than most. Paul claims (especially in his letter to the Romans) that righteousness itself has changed its meaning – changed its definitions – altogether. It is no longer about our behavior; it is about our relationship with Jesus – and hence our relationship with God. Righteousness itself is about this relationship – not about any rules. It all rests on the love and goodness of God – not on *our* love or *our* goodness. Is there some way we can stop being careless about the New Covenant – about grace itself? There is no way to move comfortably or smoothly between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. They are dimensionally different from each other. You must be born anew. New wine bursts the old wineskins. We die to our former way of life. We are converted. We are baptized and rise from the waters into a New Life – “*a New Covenant ... not like the Covenant I made with their fathers when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.*” Everywhere we turn, the New Covenant is new and different from the Old Covenant. They will not homogenize! We cannot make a happy compromise between them. If we try, we lose them both. Indeed, that is exactly what has happened in most places.

Most everyone would agree that the Ten Commandments are the heart and core of the Old Covenant. What is the fourth commandment? “*Remember [observe] the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.*” For four thousand years, every religious Jew has known that nobody can be acceptable to God unless they keep this fourth commandment. But none of you pay the slightest attention to it. What good is a commandment if we pay no attention to it, or if we change it all around whenever it suits us? Coming to worship together as a community is not even close to a commandment in our time. If it is convenient or if we have nothing more important to do, we can come to a worship service, but we cannot even be bothered to get the day right. And the fourth commandment is not the only one among the

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TEN that gets this lackadaisical – this “we have no intention of being serious or obedient” – kind of treatment.

Is it possible that anybody here still imagines that the New Covenant is easier or softer than the Old Covenant? That the First Covenant was too hard, so Jesus came with an easier, softer WAY? That we found keeping the Sabbath and not stealing or committing adultery too demanding, so now all we have to do is be crucified, die to self, forgive each other seventy times seven, love each other as Jesus loves us, turn will and life over to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and other “duck soup” kinds of teachings?

Do we really still imagine that we can find a smooth and happy little transition between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant?

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Most of us are familiar with the idea that we should try harder to be good. We have been thinking such thoughts and making such efforts ever since we were little children. But how do we try harder to trust God? It is a contradiction in concepts. We either trust or we do not. Jesus tried to make it clear to His disciples when they came to Him asking Him to increase their faith. (In this and most contexts, faith means trust.) “Increase our trust in God,” they said. How did Jesus reply? It is so clear we still miss it. Jesus said, “*If you had trust the size of a mustard seed*” That is, if you had the smallest amount of trust that anybody can measure or imagine, all things would be possible for you. You do not need more trust – you need *any* trust. *Any* amount of faith or trust is totally sufficient. We either trust God or we do not. We either trust God and close down our fear or we do not.

Getting earnest and sincere: How would any of us get careless with the New Covenant? We know the world gets careless with the Old Covenant; the evidence is all around us every day we live here. But how would any of us get careless with the New Covenant?

By forgetting that we are forgiven. By forgetting that the loved ones all around us are forgiven.

By losing our sense of gratitude.

By doubting the love and grace of God toward us.

By forgetting the love and grace of God toward others.

By allowing fear and guilt and loneliness to come back in to rule our lives once again.

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If we forget that we are forgiven or lose our gratitude toward Jesus, is that as grave a crime against the New Covenant as stealing or murder is against the Old Covenant? And are not the consequences at least as severe?

Oh yes, the grace and love of Jesus is in many ways harder than the Law. And yet in other ways, it is ever so much easier. But the New Covenant is indeed NEW! And the New Covenant is always being offered by the Messiah – the Christ of God. And Jesus says, in endless ways and in urgent invitation: Stay in Hell – in isolation, loneliness, aimlessness, chaos, rebellion – or come with ME, and we will go HOME – to the Father.