

An introduction to *Solomon: kingdom and worship*

Imagine you find a magic lantern. There's a genie inside, and it grants you three wishes. Anything you want. What would you ask for? (*The only rule is you cannot ask for more than three wishes!*) I think many people would probably wish for money, enough to buy a new car, fix up the house, buy a house, pay off the mortgage, go on that overseas trip you've been dreaming of for years. Or maybe you're more sentimental. Maybe you would love to wish for children, or another grandchild. Or maybe you wish for more energy, or a hidden talent to be an amazing public speaker, or to have a beautiful singing voice that people would love to listen to. There are so many wonderful things to wish for.

One man was given this opportunity. Except he did not have three wishes, only one. And it wasn't a make-believe, powerless genie, but the true and awesome God powerfully fulfilling everything that he promises. You may already know the story. The man whom God gave this incredible gift to was Solomon. Solomon was the third king of Israel, reigning from 970–930 BC, the son and successor of King David, and he lived almost three thousand years ago, in present day Palestine.

2 Chronicles 1–9 is where this study *Solomon: kingdom and worship* is drawn from. It might surprise you to know that 2 Chronicles was actually written hundreds of years after Solomon lived. Many people who have any familiarity with Christianity would have heard of King Solomon. Yet they might not know too much about him. Perhaps, if asked what they could recall about him, they would say, wasn't he that really wise king? (*Yes, he was!*) Wasn't he incredibly rich? (*Yes, again!*) Didn't he have something to do with a song? (*Maybe you are thinking of the book, Song of Solomon?*) Wasn't he a poet? (*Tradition holds that Solomon wrote the book of Ecclesiastes*).

Solomon was all this and more. God came to Solomon and gave him a blank cheque. "Ask me for whatever you want me to give you" (2 Chronicles 1:7). Solomon could have asked for immense wealth, great honour, the death of his enemies, or even an extraordinarily long life. But he asked for something else instead: wisdom.

Perhaps you might think Solomon had a moment of panic and said the first thing that came into his head. Maybe you can imagine him kicking himself later on for not asking for something different. But the story does not end here — indeed, it does not even *begin* here. And it is worth remembering that when God equips and blesses people, he always does so for a purpose. And to understand God's purpose here, we need to step back for a moment.

The story of God's relationship with humanity began in a garden — in Eden. The first man and woman were created by God, and for God: to live in perfect harmony with God himself

— and also in perfect harmony with each other and all creation. But when they rejected God's loving rule over their lives — what the Bible calls sin — they also rejected the source of life. And so their rebellion would result in death, and this curse would follow all humanity since. But we are not without hope. Because another story also started here: the story of how God has been and still is at work in achieving salvation for his people. As God pronounced the consequences of humanity's sin, he also proclaimed that a Saviour would come (Genesis 3:15).

God progressively revealed how he would go about his salvation plan. He chose Abraham and made a covenant with him. A covenant is a binding promise defining how humans relate to God, including blessings for covenant faithfulness and judgment for disobedience. This covenant extended to all of Abraham's descendants who would become the nation of Israel. This nation would inherit specific land (Genesis 15:18–21), they would be blessed by God and they would bless all other nations (Genesis 12:3). This nation left the land God had promised Abraham to escape famine, and later was forced into slave labour for four hundred years in Egypt. But God raised up Moses, a leader to rescue his people. God first demonstrated his power and commitment to his people. When they were freed, God established a new covenant with his people. This covenant made a way to deal with his people's sin so that the holy God could dwell among them. But God would only dwell in a tent, just as his people lived, until they were settled in the place he would choose (Deuteronomy 12:5–6).

When Israel returned to the promised land, they settled the land. But they also kept abandoning the covenant, earning God's judgement by being invaded by foreign armies. Eventually God's people demanded a king, like the other nations around them. God appointed Saul as the first king, but he also abandoned the covenant, so God rejected him as king. God chose David to replace him. David completed the conquest and settlement of the promised land through a series of wars. David conquered the city Jebus and renamed it as his capital, Jerusalem. Many years later with the land at peace, David's son Solomon built the temple and the nation prospered under him. But some unfaithful decisions later in Solomon's life brought about God's judgement for the nation and many of the later kings also betrayed the covenant with God. God's judgement was their exile in Babylon (2 Chronicles 10–36.) The kingdom was destroyed by war, the temple ransacked and lying in ruins and the people exiled from the promised land. It was a bleak situation.

But God was still at work to achieve his salvation purposes. He moved the heart of Cyrus, king of Persia to allow God's people to return to the promised land and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:1–4). There were a few major groups of people who made the journey back. Sadly, many of God's people chose not to return. The first group returned in 538 BC. Eighty years later Ezra the priest led another group of exiles back — including children and the elderly —

walking for about four months and travelling around 1450 kilometres or 900 miles from Babylon to Jerusalem.

While the author of 2 Chronicles is anonymous, it has traditionally been credited to Ezra the priest. Upon returning to Jerusalem, the post-exile community found a discouraging situation. The temple had been devastated and progress on rebuilding it faced opposition. When the foundations for the second temple were laid, the priests and the old men who had seen the first temple wept loudly because they had seen the first temple in all its glory and the second temple was a far cry from the first (Ezra 3:12). But despite all appearances and discouragement, God had not given up on them, and neither had he given up on his promises. The Chronicler knew this. So he wrote of past events to encourage his post-exile community — to emphasise the forgiveness and restoration God offers to his people when they repent.

Now God's people were restored to the land, but they were still under foreign rule. The Chronicler looked back at God's past faithfulness to his people as a testament to his character and evidence that he would continue to be faithful to his promises into the future. The Chronicler intentionally did not go into all the detail about Solomon's reign that other accounts cover. The purpose of the Chronicler's account was not to create a comprehensive record of Solomon's life. Instead the Chronicler intentionally selected aspects of Israel's history that would remind God's people of God's past faithfulness — and challenge and encourage them to live faithfully in light of his promises. To achieve this goal, the Chronicler focused on the first half of Solomon's rule, which this study explores in 2 Chronicles 1–9.

The wisdom and splendour of King Solomon is legendary. His reign over Israel brought the nation to the height of its prosperity and international influence. Under Solomon's leadership Israel truly was set high above the nations in "praise, fame and honour", just as God had promised Deuteronomy 26:19. But what lay behind this success? And what was God's purpose in it?

In this study we see Solomon's heart for God as he builds and dedicates the magnificent temple for the Lord that his father David had planned. This will also help us discover what the temple symbolised and who it foreshadowed — and what this now means for all people.

God had promised he would not rest until his people were at rest (1 Chronicles 17:4–6). Under David, the nation had settled. So the time had come for God to also be at rest and dwell in a permanent structure among them, no longer in a tent. King David had been God's chosen instrument to finish conquering the promised land and settle his people. But David was a warrior king, and he had established Israel as a nation through many bloody wars and conflicts. God's Spirit put the plans for the temple in David's mind (1 Chronicles 28:12), and

David prepared treasuries to fund the temple building. But instead God chose David's son Solomon — whose name means 'peace' — to be the one to build the temple.

Until the temple was built God had dwelt in the tabernacle. The tabernacle was a tent structure whose layout was similar to the temple. The key difference was that the tabernacle was able to be assembled and disassembled to be moved around in the period before Israel settled in the land. The tabernacle was smaller than the temple and far plainer — although still made with skill and excellent craftsmanship. It had represented God's wandering presence. But now Israel had settled — and so now would God also settle and dwell among them.

But before Solomon even started building the temple, God offered him an extraordinary gift: whatever he asked of God. It was mentioned briefly earlier. And Solomon asked for wisdom and knowledge so that he could lead God's people. Solomon recognised that no human could lead faithfully in their own strength, so he acknowledged this before God and asked God to equip him for the very purpose God had given him. And God rewarded Solomon's humility: precisely because Solomon did not exploit God's gift for selfish gain of wealth or possessions or honour or long life, God blessed him abundantly with wisdom and knowledge and all these things "such as no king who was before you ever had and none after you will have" (2 Chronicles 1:12).

The primary task of Solomon's reign was to build the temple. God would dwell permanently among them and Israel would be able to come to offer sacrifices for sin before him, in keeping with the covenant. But Solomon did not have a small view of God. The Almighty God was not like the false gods of the surrounding nations, carved statues and powerless idols in sitting deaf and silent in their temples. Solomon asked who could possibly build a temple for the God of the universe, when "the heavens, even the highest heavens cannot contain him?" But he recognised the importance of having a place where God would physically dwell among his people so that they would have a "place to burn sacrifices before him" (2 Chronicles 2:6).

Solomon would build a great temple, because God is so much greater than any other and it would be represented in the craftsmanship and splendour of the temple. No expense or effort would be spared. Solomon sourced the finest timbers and the best stones and the best skilled workers to work with these materials as well as many fine metals and engravings. Solomon conscripted over 150 000 foreigners living in Israel to be labourers for the temple and appointed thousands of Israelite workers over them.

The temple represented both God's presence with his people and the separation required for sinful humans to dwell with a holy God. It had a series of thresholds that restricted people from coming too close to God's presence for their own safety. Each level required

greater levels of ritual purity. The more restricted it became, the more its magnificence grew. The Most Holy Place was covered entirely in gold. This room, only the High Priest could enter, and only once a year on the Day of Atonement to sprinkle blood, and after very specific purifying rituals (Leviticus 16:1–17).

The purpose of the temple was to offer sacrifices before God, and a bronze altar was built for this very purpose. This was no small matter, and the altar's size reflected this: it measured 9 metres by 9 metres wide and 4.5 metres high — the size of a large room. Between the sacrifices and the increasingly restricted access to God, God's people were starkly aware of their sinful nature. But even as the temple pointed out sin, God used it to extend forgiveness as the people humbled themselves before him and repented. This was not a harsh system to identify fault, but rather a system God had put in place to show his people how seriously he took their sin. God could not overlook his people's sin, but he extended mercy to his people hand in hand in with judgement borne by their sacrifices. Solomon understood this was necessary for humans to have fellowship with God. Solomon set up Levitical choirs to sing praises for what God had done. They sang the joyful refrain: "The LORD is good, his love endures forever!" (2 Chronicles 5:13).

The temple was the place where God's name was to be. The temple represented who God is and testified to what he has done to Israel and to the nations. God showed his acceptance of the temple when a dark cloud settled over the temple. This dark cloud was the *shekinah* glory cloud, which both concealed and revealed God's glory. Once this happened, even Solomon, the king, could no longer approach the Most Holy Place where God's presence dwelt.

Solomon wisely humbled himself before God and his people as he knelt to pray. Solomon prayed for his nation, that they would rely on God, and that when in the future they unfaithful to God, they would repent and he would restore them. Solomon recognised that God was not only God of Israel, but of the entire world. So he also prayed that God's people would be a light to the nations, and that through their faithfulness, foreigners would also hear of God's great Name and come to pray to him. God answered Solomon, promising that he would hear his people when they repented and restore them. He would not give up on them. God also answered Solomon's prayer for Israel to witness to nations when the queen of Sheba came from the ends of the earth to hear Solomon's wisdom.

But even the temple did not allow perfect fellowship with God. The temple only foreshadowed the one who would provide the perfect sacrifice, once for all. Solomon's temple gave a glimpse of God's presence to come: Jesus, who dwelt among us (John 1:1–4). Through him, God answered Solomon's prayer to reach out to the nations through the church's world-wide mission. And through Jesus, God has cleansed his people, once for all,

so that they can come humbly and confidently into the Most Holy Place and have perfect, eternal fellowship with him.