

King Solomon and the Need to Rule the Spirit

Key Verse: “He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.” (Proverbs 16:32, KJV)

Introduction

We have all heard of Solomon. The man who could have written a thousand wisdom books but could not write a single prescription for his own heart. He spoke of birds and beasts, of trees from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that springs out of the wall. Kings and queens traveled from the ends of the earth just to sit at his feet and listen. And yet, as the one-sentence summary puts it so sharply: “He wrote 3,000 proverbs but could not outsmart his own appetites; wisdom without self-control is just a trophy on a sinking ship.”

That sentence is not meant to mock Solomon. It is meant to save us. For if Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived apart from Christ Himself, could drift into ruin, then none of us is safe on autopilot. Today I want to build on that sobering truth, but I want to build it upward, toward hope. We will look at three themes: first, the lavish gift of wisdom that God truly delights to give; second, the subtle power of unguarded appetites that turn a throne into a trap; and third, the beautiful, practical grace of ruling our own spirit, which the Bible calls a greater victory than capturing any city. Let us learn from Solomon’s ship not to despise the anchor of self-control.

Theme One: The Lavish Gift of Wisdom – God Does Not Withhold

Let us begin with the positive. God gave Solomon his wisdom freely and abundantly. The Lord said to Solomon, “Ask what I shall give thee.” (1 Kings 3:5, KJV) Solomon did not ask for long life, riches, or the lives of his enemies. He asked for “an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad.” (1 Kings 3:9, KJV) And the Lord was pleased. “And God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment; Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee.” (1 Kings 3:11-12, KJV)

That is the goodness of God. He does not mock us when we seek wisdom. He pours it out. James echoes this: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.” (James 1:5, KJV) So the first thing we must grasp is that wisdom is a gift, not a wage. Solomon did not earn it; he received it. And that gift produced glorious fruit. He spoke three thousand proverbs (1 Kings 4:32). He wrote of the ant and the sluggard, of the virtuous woman, of the tongue that speaks life. His wisdom built the Temple, settled disputes between harlots, and made Israel a wonder among nations.

But here is the warning hidden in the blessing: wisdom can become a trophy. A trophy is something you look at, admire, polish, and display. A trophy does not steer the ship; it sits on the shelf. Solomon collected wisdom as a king collects gold. And that is precisely where the trouble began. He began to admire his own understanding rather than obey his own counsel. He became a curator of proverbs instead of a captive to them. And that is why the second theme is so urgent.

Theme Two: The Deception of Appetite – How the Ship Springs a Leak

The Bible is painfully honest about Solomon’s decline. “But king Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites; Of the nations concerning which the Lord said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall not go in to them, neither shall they come in unto you: for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods: Solomon clave unto these in love.” (1 Kings 11:1-2, KJV)

Notice the progression. It begins with “loved,” a word that sounds noble. But here love is not the love of God; it is the appetite of a king who believed he could handle a little compromise. He told himself, “I have wisdom; I can manage these relationships without losing my heart.” He was wrong. “For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father.” (1 Kings 11:4, KJV)

The same man who wrote, “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life” (Proverbs 4:23, KJV) lost his own heart to a thousand women and their idols. The same man who warned, “Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise” (Proverbs 20:1, KJV) drank deeply from the cup of every foreign god. The same man who said, “A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself:

but the simple pass on, and are punished” (Proverbs 22:3, KJV) walked straight into evil with his eyes wide open.

What happened? He treated self-control as optional. He assumed that knowing the right thing was the same as doing the right thing. He built a glorious ship of wisdom, loaded it with proverbs and psalms and architectural marvels, but he forgot to plug the small holes of daily appetite. A little indulgence here, a small compromise there, a friendship that God warned against, a marriage that God forbade. Each one was a crack in the hull. And over decades, those cracks became a flood. By the end of his life, Solomon had built altars to Chemosh and Molech, the gods of child sacrifice. The man who dedicated the Temple with tears now bowed before demons. That is not a fall; that is a slow, quiet sinking.

But God did not erase Solomon from the Bible. He did not strike his name from the roll of Israel’s kings. Why? Because the story does not end in despair. Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, likely as an old man looking back. “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” (Ecclesiastes 1:2, KJV) That is the voice of a man who has seen his ship go down and is now swimming in the wreckage, crying out to God. And that cry is the doorway to our third theme.

Theme Three: The Anchor of Self-Control – A Greater Victory Than a City

Let us return to the key verse: “He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.” (Proverbs 16:32, KJV) Who wrote this verse? Solomon did. He wrote it while he still had the gift of wisdom fresh upon him. He knew the truth. He simply did not live it. But that does not make the verse false; it makes it urgent. The verse stands as a mirror to every one of us. It says that self-control is not a minor virtue; it is a monumental victory. Taking a city requires armies, strategy, and blood. Ruling your own spirit requires something harder: daily dying to yourself.

Solomon took many cities. He built Gezer, Beth-horon, and Baalath. He amassed chariots and horsemen. He was mighty. But because he did not rule his spirit, all those cities became monuments to a man who could not say no to his own desires. Beloved, here is the good news. God does not leave us to muster self-control from our own willpower. The fruit of the Spirit is “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.” (Galatians 5:22-23, KJV) That word “temperance” is self-control. It is a fruit, not a factory product. It grows as we abide in Christ.

And here is where Solomon's failure becomes our instruction. Do not wait until you are old to guard your heart. Do not assume that because you have wisdom, you are immune to appetite. The same hands that wrote the Proverbs wrote checks the body could not cash. But you can learn from his shipwreck. You can ask God today, "Lord, show me the small leaks. Show me where I am displaying wisdom as a trophy instead of wielding self-control as an anchor."

Think of the Lord Jesus, the greater than Solomon. He was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin. He ruled His spirit perfectly. When He was hungry in the wilderness, He did not turn stones to bread. When He was offered all the kingdoms of the world, He did not bow. When He was mocked and crucified, He did not call ten thousand angels. That same Spirit lives in you if you are in Christ. Therefore, you do not have to sink. You may have already taken on water. You may have a trophy room full of Bible knowledge while your heart is drifting toward idolatry. But it is not too late. Repentance is the pump that empties the ship.

Conclusion

Solomon's life preaches one loud, loving sermon: wisdom is a gift, but self-control is the gate that keeps that gift from becoming a curse. Do not merely admire your knowledge. Obey it. Do not merely quote Proverbs. Live them. And when you fail, as Solomon failed, do not hide behind your reputation. Do what Solomon finally did in Ecclesiastes: look at the vanity of a life without God, and turn back. God did not abandon him. The last chapter of Ecclesiastes says, "Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man." (Ecclesiastes 12:13, KJV) That is the voice of a man who has seen his ship sink and has crawled onto the rock of simple obedience.

Let us not wait for our own Ecclesiastes moment. Let us rule our spirits today, by the grace of God, for that is better than taking a city. And let the trophy of wisdom be not a golden calf on a sinking deck, but a quiet, steady anchor that holds until the Captain brings us home. Amen.