A house of Prayer

The message of 2 Chronicles

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Introduction to 2 Chronicles

The book of Chronicles is one book and needs to be read as such. However, for the sake of reference and convenience it has been divided into two volumes, 1 and 2 Chronicles. This commentary seeks to explain the message of 2 Chronicles. A survey of the whole book of Chronicles is found in the Welwyn Commentary on 1 Chronicles, *A Family Tree*; it covers such issues as the authorship, date, theology and contents of Chronicles. Readers of this commentary may benefit from reading that introduction before beginning to study 2 Chronicles.

It is worthwhile explaining the title of this volume, *A House of Prayer*. It seeks to highlight the distinctive focus of the history covered by 2 Chronicles, which is the place of the temple in the life of the nation of Israel (and later the southern kingdom of Judah). 2 Chronicles commences with the building of the temple during the reign of King Solomon and in its closing verses it envisages the rebuilding of the temple after the return of the exiles to Judah in the time of Zerubbabel. Much of the action described in 2 Chronicles—apostasy as well as reformation—

took place within the temple precincts. The temple was a place where God had placed his name; it was a place towards which God's people would pray; it provided a geographical forum for God's redemptive actions during the period of the Israelite monarchy.

The prophets of the Old Testament saw the significance of such a place. They knew that places and buildings do not, in themselves, guarantee salvation (Jer. 7:1–7). However, God's redemptive acts are *historical* and that means they are located in space and time. When God redeemed his people he would send his promised Messiah to a place where a sacrifice was to be offered: '"Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple, the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty' (Mal. 3:1). When God proclaimed salvation he would send his gospel from that place of sacrifice:

> Many nations will come and say,
> 'Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
> to the house of the God of Jacob.
> He will teach us his ways,
> so that we may walk in his paths.'
> The law will go out from Zion,
> the word of the Lord from Jerusalem
>
> (Micah 4:2).

Since the resurrection of Jesus Christ redemption is now a completed work and the place where the great sacrifice of atonement took place is no longer the focus of our attention. Our focus is on the *person* who offered himself as the final and all-sufficient sacrifice for sinners. 'Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before

him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God' (Heb. 12:2). He does not now minister in an earthly temple, for he sits at the right hand of God the Father in heaven.

Rejoicing in the completed work of Christ does not mean that we must forget those Old Testament believers who worshipped and ministered in an earthly temple. In fact as we follow the faith and, yes, the failures too, of these worshippers we are pointed to Christ, the everlasting Temple. That is why God has given us the book of Chronicles. It is good for us to learn about their struggles to be faithful to God. It is good for us to take heed when we read of their descent into disobedience. It is good for us to be exhilarated when we read about godly leaders who called the nation back to the grace of God.

Much of this book was written as an encouragement to ordinary Israelites who were struggling to be faithful in daily and mundane matters. Much of the post-exilic period in Israel's history seemed like the 'day of small things' which Zechariah urged his readers not to despise (Zech. 4:10). Surely modern readers can relate to these challenges and discouragements! Yet there is a great hero who towers above all these struggles, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who, at the place of God's choosing and appointment, took away the sins of the world.

1

A test for Solomon

Please read 2 Chronicles 1:1–17

Our first attempts to do something new are very important, for they establish our patterns and habits of behaviour, and once those habits are established it is very difficult to change them. Every golfer knows that if he is going to play well he needs a good stance at the tee and a good grip on his golf club. If, as an inexperienced player, he developed a wrong way of holding his club and positioning his feet, these seemingly trivial mistakes can ruin his game. After a few years it is hard to break old habits and learn a new way of playing. In any area of life a bad start is hard to remedy, but a good start is a great blessing.

That is why the early days of the reign of King Solomon were so important. To the Chronicler (who wrote this history after the return of the Jewish people from exile in Babylon) Solomon was the model king. During his reign the temple in Jerusalem

was built and the kingdom of Israel reached its zenith. Solomon presided over a truly golden age in biblical history to which subsequent generations of Israelites looked back with awe and envy. They also looked back to learn lessons about what the Lord was doing in their own day. The history of Solomon taught them about the everlasting covenant that God had made with his people, the importance of true worship and the glory of God's kingdom, but it also taught them about the need to make a good start.

Like every leader, Solomon had to make many decisions, and some of them were demanding (see 1 Kings 3:16–28), but in this chapter we read of the most important decision that he was called to make as King of Israel. In 1:7 God appeared to Solomon and said to him, 'Ask for whatever you want me to give you.' The answer that Solomon gave to this question would determine what the rest of his reign would be like.

The background to Solomon's reign (1:1–6)

In some ways the break between 1 and 2 Chronicles is an artificial one. Both books were written by the same author, at the same time, and as one book. For the sake of convenience this book was divided into two parts by the scribes who copied the text of the Old Testament onto scrolls for people to read. It would have required two of the scrolls typically used in Old Testament times to copy out the whole book of Chronicles, so an informal division was made. This division was formalized by the translators of the Old Testament into Greek (a version which came to be known as the Septuagint), for in this translation Chronicles appears as two separate books.

The division is, however, not an arbitrary or unhelpful one, for it marks an important milestone in Israel's history. David,

the great warrior king, had laid a strong foundation for the kingdom, and now Solomon sought to build upon it. Threats from within and without had been subdued and a strong central government had been set up. David had wanted to go further and build a temple for the Lord in Jerusalem (1 Chr. 17), but God had prevented David from building the temple, because it was not appropriate that he, a man of war, should build it (1 Chr. 22:6–10). Solomon, a man of peace, would build the temple, while David devoted the rest of his reign to setting aside the materials which Solomon would use in its construction (1 Chr. 28; 29). With these preparations made, it was Solomon's task to build. The temple and the kingdom are the themes that bind the message of Chronicles together. Preparation is the theme of 1 Chronicles, while dedication and reformation are the themes of 2 Chronicles.

We are reminded of this transition in the opening words: 'Solomon son of David established himself firmly over his kingdom, for the LORD his God was with him and made him exceedingly great' (1:1). The verb translated 'established himself firmly' is a strong, or intensive, one. We get an insight into what this involved for Solomon from 1 Kings chapters 1–2, which are sometimes called 'the succession narrative'. Here we are told about Solomon's rival for the throne, his half-brother Adonijah. As David lay dying, Adonijah sought to stage a palace coup to displace Solomon, David's chosen heir. Only the courageous actions of Bathsheba (Solomon's mother), Nathan the prophet and Zadok the priest prevented him from succeeding. When it became clear that Solomon would indeed take the throne David advised him, 'Be strong, show yourself [to be] a man' (1 Kings 2:2).

The Chronicler begins his account of Solomon's reign with

the new king firmly in control of his kingdom. The setting is an assembly of national leaders and representatives of all the people ('the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds … the judges and … all the leaders in Israel, the heads of families') at Gibeon. Gibeon was ten kilometres (just over six miles) north-west of Jerusalem in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin. It had been one of the royal cities before the Israelite conquest of Canaan and its inhabitants had deceived Joshua to ensure their survival (Joshua 9:3–6; 10:2). After the conquest Gibeon's central location made it a focal point for national gatherings. It had a 'high place' where sacrifices were offered to the Lord, and 'God's Tent of Meeting' was there (1:3).

As well as inheriting David's kingdom, Solomon inherited institutions of worship that went back to the time of Moses. These institutions were now to be renewed.

At Gibeon there was the tabernacle 'which Moses the LORD's servant had made in the desert'. Also there was the 'bronze altar that Bezalel son of Uri' had made (1:5). Bezalel was the skilled craftsman specially equipped by God to make the bronze altar and many other items used in the tabernacle. In Exodus 31:2–5 God told Moses, 'See I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship.' This is significant in view of the gift that God would later give to Solomon. He would be endowed with wisdom so that he could complete the temple.

There was one very glaring irregularity about the tabernacle that Solomon found at Gibeon. When Moses built the

tabernacle, it contained both the bronze altar and the ark of the covenant. The ark (the symbol of the covenant between God and his people) was kept in the Most Holy Place, or the inner room of the tabernacle. When the tabernacle was built and commissioned, the Shekinah glory of God came down and rested over the ark (Exodus 40:34). The route to the ark went past the altar of burnt offering upon which the sacrificial animal died in the place of the sinner. There was no forgiveness, and hence no acceptance with God, apart from the shedding of blood on the altar of burnt offering. However, by the time that Solomon became king, the altar and the ark had been separated. The 'bronze altar' was at Gibeon while the 'ark' was in Jerusalem.

Something of the recent history of the ark is indicated by the short account in 1:4. After Hophni and Phinehas, the godless sons of Eli, the high priest, had lost the ark to the Philistines in battle (1 Samuel 4:1–11), it was eventually returned to Israel and by stages brought up to Jerusalem by King David (1 Chronicles 13; 15). However, the ark was never returned to its rightful place inside the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle. There it symbolized the blessings enjoyed through the atonement accomplished by the shedding of the blood of the sacrificial substitute. It was Solomon's task to build a temple in which the altar and the ark would be brought together permanently. By this means the symbols of atonement and acceptance would be contained in close proximity within one building. It is important that believers see the clear link between what Christ has done for them and the privileges they enjoy.

Solomon entered into his life's work knowing that this had been mapped out for him by God. For hundreds of years God had been preparing for this work. Solomon was entering upon a path that was unknown to him, but not to God. He went up

to Gibeon to accept the responsibilities of his office (charge over the people of Israel) and to seek God's blessing as he worshipped. 'Solomon went up to the bronze altar before the LORD in the Tent of Meeting and offered a thousand burnt offerings on it' (1:6).

The testing of Solomon's character (1:7–10)

We often think that testing times are also difficult times. Bereavement, illness, unemployment, or strained relationships are, to be sure, times when a believer's faith is tested. However, times of blessing can also be times of testing. Some people will readily cry to God when they have no one else to turn to, but they very quickly forget about him after he has answered their prayers.

In these verses Solomon was tested by an offer from God: 'That night God appeared to Solomon and said to him, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you"' (1:7). Solomon's response (recorded in 1:8–10) is significant for two reasons.

Firstly, *he acknowledged God's goodness* to him and his family before he went on to ask for more: 'You have shown great kindness to David my father and have made me king in his place.' There should always be thanksgiving as well as intercession in our prayers. In fact it is a good discipline in our praying to consider how God has answered our past requests before we bring new ones.

Another reason why Solomon's response is significant is because of *the request he made* to God. It may be helpful to consider how we might have answered that question had it been put to us. It is interesting to listen to children talking about the presents they hope to receive, perhaps for their birthday

or at Christmas. Some of them, in their naïveté, imagine that everything is there for the asking—and how their imagination runs riot! Doesn't our imagination similarly run riot as we think of the enormity of the offer that God set before Solomon—'Ask for whatever you want'?

What might Solomon have asked for? In 1:11 God lists some of the blessings that the young king might have sought from him. Solomon might have asked for 'wealth, riches or honour', or 'the death of [his] enemies', or 'long life'. All of these were legitimate things for a king to seek. As the Lord's anointed over Israel, Solomon was responsible for maintaining the security and stability of his kingdom. The peace and prosperity of the nation were closely tied to his own well-being. There were also many unworthy requests that Solomon might have made, or he could have asked for good things with an unworthy motive, but he did not. Instead, he asked God for 'wisdom and knowledge' (1:10).

Two words are used in this verse to describe the blessing Solomon sought from God. There are two sides to true biblical wisdom. The first word describes 'prudence', or 'shrewdness'. It is the ability to digest the facts and respond appropriately. This is wisdom undergirded by the moral law of God. We should never confuse this wisdom with the hard-nosed pragmatism of the calculating man of the world. According to Job 28:28, 'The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom.'

The second word that Solomon used means 'knowledge'. It describes information that has been amassed. Daniel and his young friends in the Babylonian training school had this kind of knowledge, for they were 'handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of *learning*, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace' (Daniel 1:4). 1 Kings

4:29–33 draws attention to this aspect of Solomon's wisdom: 'God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore… He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish.'

Scripture brings together these two ideas to describe the wisdom that God gives (see Deuteronomy 4:6; Psalm 49:3; Proverbs 2:2; Isaiah 11:2; Ephesians 1:8). It is a wisdom that is interested in the world which God has created and in which we live. It is a wisdom that grapples with the problems of our world. Christians can take great delight, as Solomon did, in learning about the world of nature, and in applying their minds to understanding human nature. It is good to learn about these things, but as we study them we must recognize that without the gift of discernment none of our enquiries will lead very far. We need this wisdom from God.

Solomon recognized this at the beginning of his reign when he asked God for 'wisdom and knowledge'. He recognized his need for wisdom and he recognized that wisdom comes from God. 'For the LORD gives wisdom …' (Prov. 2:6). 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom' (Prov. 9:10; cf. 1:7). 'If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him' (James 1:5).

On the other hand, there is such a thing as human, or worldly, wisdom. Often it is purely pragmatic; people say that a course of action is wise simply because it 'works' for them. For instance, the world often tells us to 'look after number one', or that money in the bank is what gives our lives real security. This is the 'wisdom' that governs the lives of many people around us,

but it is not God's wisdom. Divine wisdom (like the gospel itself) appears foolish to the world (1 Cor. 1:20–21), but it is far greater than the wisdom of the world, for it is vindicated by God's eternal judgement. God's 'Well done!' is bestowed upon those who live their lives according to his wisdom. This is the wisdom that Solomon seeks.

The purpose of Solomon's wisdom (1:10–13)

With a great sense of his own inadequacy for the task ahead of him, Solomon asked for wisdom (1:10). He asked God, 'Who is able to govern this great people of yours?' At a similar point in his life, C. H. Spurgeon felt a similar sense of inadequacy. In 1854, at the age of nineteen, when he moved from his first pastorate in the small Cambridgeshire village of Waterbeach to the prestigious pulpit of New Park Street Baptist Church in London, he described his fear as follows: 'Who was I that I should lead so great a multitude? I would betake myself to my village obscurity … It was just then that the curtain was rising upon my life work, and I dreaded what it might reveal.'

Solomon was taking up the heavy responsibilities as the Lord's anointed king over the people of Israel. Perhaps only someone who has experienced the loneliness that comes with power can really understand what a burden this is. Shakespeare's King Henry V, on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt, describes the burden that rests on the shoulders of a king:

> Upon the King! Let us our lives, our souls,
> Our debts, our careful wives,
> Our children, and our sins, lay on the King!
> We must bear all. O hard condition,
> Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath
> Of every fool, whose sense no more can feel

> But his own wringing! What infinite heart's ease
> Must kings neglect that private men enjoy!
> (*Henry V*, Act IV, Scene I, lines 222–30).

The demands upon King Solomon were immense. He was following in the footsteps of David, the great warrior king, and would have to control David's fierce generals, who sometimes were too difficult even for David himself to handle (see 2 Sam. 3:39). He would have to work with wily politicians, cunning diplomats from powerful neighbours and a host of officials at home. Then, too, there were thousands upon thousands of ordinary people who would come to Solomon for justice and advice. The happiness of their daily lives would rest upon him.

As well as these demanding tasks, there was the work of building the temple in Jerusalem. This great work would dominate Solomon's reign. It was for this purpose that Solomon was made to sit on the throne of his father David. The temple would be no ordinary building, for it was the place where God would meet with his covenant people. Many of the blessings that God stored up for his chosen nation of Israel would be enjoyed within its walls. It was to be a building set aside for the worship of the true and holy God of heaven. Human wisdom alone would not be sufficient to plan and carry out the construction of such a building. It would require God's wisdom.

With this in mind Solomon prayed for wisdom. His desire for wisdom did not arise out of curiosity, or a yearning for praise. He sought wisdom so that he might do the work that God had laid upon him. The eyes of the whole nation were upon Solomon. Everything he did and said was seen by his people and the surrounding nations. As a result of his actions God would either be greatly honoured or greatly dishonoured; God's people

would either be greatly blighted or greatly blessed. What a heavy burden to rest upon the heart of a young king! Is it any wonder he prayed, 'Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead this people'? (1:10).

The two marks of a pure heart are the desire to *do the right thing* and the desire to *do it for the right reason*. Solomon desired a good thing (wisdom from God) and he desired it for the right reason (so that he could do the great work that God had laid upon him). What an excellent start to his reign! This was a prayer that pleased God, and God showed his great pleasure by promising to answer it in abundance—'Therefore wisdom and knowledge will be given you' (1:12)—and by also promising Solomon the blessings he had not asked for: 'And I will also give you wealth, riches and honour, such as no king who was before you ever had and none after you will have.'

The priorities of God's people must always be like those of Solomon—kingdom-centred priorities. Our Lord expressed it this way: 'Seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well' (Matt. 6:33). This will express itself in the prayers we pray, the plans we make, the ambitions we cherish and the way we set about our daily lives. Our first goal will be to be useful servants of God. And if our ambitions are in line with God's purposes, not only shall we see them being realized, but we shall enjoy far greater blessings than we even dared seek for in prayer.

The magnificence of Solomon's kingdom (1:14–17)

These verses describe how God did in fact bless Solomon. The tokens of the king's wealth and influence were impressive. They fall into four categories.

First of all, we are told that 'Solomon accumulated chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses' (1:14). In the book of Kings we read of the cities that Solomon constructed to accommodate this impressive military force (1 Kings 9:17–19; 10:26).

Secondly, we are told of Solomon's role in international trade. He was greatly helped by Israel's strategic location within the fertile crescent, between Egypt and Asia Minor. Egypt, lying to the south, is mentioned in 1:16,17 as a source for chariots and horses. 'Kue', lying to the north, is Cilicia in south-east Asia Minor. It too was a source from which Solomon's merchants purchased horses. It was also the route through which these merchants would have exported their chariots to the 'kings of the Hittites'. According to one commentator, Solomon's position on the main trade routes between Asia and Africa 'made him the middleman in the contemporary arms race'—a very lucrative position indeed.

The third indication of the great blessing bestowed upon Solomon is the abundance of 'silver and gold' in his kingdom. These precious metals have always been a symbol of national wealth, and even today central banks store bars of silver and gold in heavily fortified underground vaults as a safeguard for national currencies. The fabulous wealth of Solomon's kingdom is vividly illustrated by the fact that 'The king made silver and gold as common in Jerusalem as stones' (1:15).

Then fourthly, the abundance of 'cedar' wood is mentioned (1:15). This sturdy wood was a valuable building material. In the twentieth century it was accepted that 'Steel is power' because no powerful economy could prosper without a plentiful supply of such a basic building material. In Solomon's time a supply

of cedar wood was an equally valuable commodity. That there was no shortage of cedar wood in Solomon's kingdom is made clear by the comment that cedar was 'as plentiful as sycamore-fig trees in the foothills'. We should not confuse these 'sycamore-fig trees' with the stately timber-bearing trees of cool temperate climates. They were scrubby fig trees grown in great numbers in the Mediterranean lands for their fruit rather than their timber.

In 9:25–28 the Chronicler makes further reference to these material blessings enjoyed by Solomon, this time by way of retrospect rather than anticipation. God was faithful to the promises he made to Solomon during those early 'honeymoon' years of his reign. That faithfulness continued throughout the forty years that Solomon was king in Israel. These two accounts of the material blessings that God gave to Solomon constitute the introduction and conclusion to the Chronicler's account of his reign. In between comes what was most significant about Solomon's life—the construction of the temple in Jerusalem. Even Hiram, the heathen King of Tyre, could discern that the God of Israel had a special purpose in establishing God's kingdom: 'Because the LORD loves his people, he has made you their king' (2:11).

What Solomon has to teach us

We cannot all expect to be blessed exactly as God blessed Solomon; nor ought we to expect material blessing as a matter of course. Solomon certainly did not expect these blessings as a matter of course. He was a king in Israel and had a unique task to do for God (building the temple in Jerusalem) which required unique blessings. Today Christian believers are 'God's fellow-workers' (1 Cor. 3:9) in the building up of the church of Christ. This work takes forms that are often very different from the work given to Solomon and, as a result, 'The weapons of