

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(April 20, 2008)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: An Exercise in Futility

(studies in Ecclesiastes)

The Rise and Fall of a King

(selected passages from 1 Kings)

Study #1

Introduction: The problem with distractions...

Thinking back to my days in college, I remember one of my favorite pastimes with some regret.

If I and my classmates found ourselves in a class we didn't particularly enjoy, or were restless that day, or the sun was shining, or it was raining, we would sometimes attempt to get the teacher sidetracked into talking about something other than the lecture for the day.

One semester I was taking a class that I both didn't like and for which I had no aptitude. So, I repeatedly - and successfully - "rabbit-trailed" the teacher into irrelevant discussions. (One of my favorite ploys was to discuss medicine with him, as we had suffered similar surgeries in the recent past.) This professor could reliably be derailed for most of the class period with a well-timed question.

The other class that shows up vividly in my memory was one of the most fascinating courses I took in college - Russian history. During one class (it was mid-April in East Texas, the dogwood was blooming, the weather was picture perfect...) several of us engaged the teacher in a fascinating discussion of summer vacations, his car, and other irrelevancies. We thought we had him totally, hopelessly off track, when, in the midst of our "rabbit trail" he looked at his watch, smiled and said, "*Nice stall - 7 minutes.*" and then proceeded in his lecture on Russian history.

The success of one teacher to resist the temptation to be sidetracked and the failure of another directly affected their success in teaching. One refused to be rabbit-trailed; the other was famously distractible.

Over the years, I have learned that if someone - my college professors, me, you - does not learn to avoid the rabbit-trails of life, that person will not enjoy success in life.

To address the problem of distractedness, I'm launching a new series of studies this morning.

When thinking clearly, we will all agree that the most important issues in life are the "big-ticket" items: God, eternity, spirit, family, friendships, meaningful work, etc...

But in the midst of life's busyness, it is so easy to be distracted by the lure of lesser things - trivial pursuits and amusements. There is one book in the Bible written to address people - like me and maybe like you - who battle distractedness. This Old Testament book cuts through the fog and cuts to the chase and demands clear-eyed focus on what is really important.

Today, we turn our attention to Ecclesiastes, one of the most provocative books in the whole Bible. The themes wise old Solomon addresses in Ecclesiastes are profound. What he has to say about life's purpose and meaning reverberates with the authenticity of broad life experience, at times has the raw edge of bitterness to it, and always has the ring of truth.

Before diving into Ecclesiastes, though, I wanted us to get to know the author of Ecclesiastes. I believe that you'll find the rabbit-trailing, detour-filled life of Solomon to be fascinating. The Bible has included the distractedness of Solomon for our benefit.

Solomon began life with about as many advantages as could be imagined. Among these advantages was being born to royalty. He had an incredible pedigree.

Solomon - The Future King (2 Samuel 11-12)

What a Pedigree!

Included in Solomon's family tree are many of the great heroes and heroines of Israel - Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Judah, and of course his father, King David.

As an adult, Solomon could look back on his lineage and reflect on the unmistakable fingerprints of God in the generations that preceded him.¹

Not that there was not some tragedy in his lineage...

What a Tragedy!

David eventually became king of all Israel and reigned well for many years. However, the way he became the husband of Solomon's mother was ugly.

We find the story in 2 Samuel 11. Abusing his authority as king, David took Bathsheba, another man's wife (her husband was Uriah, one of David's most loyal soldiers) by force and lay with her.

Weeks later, Bathsheba let David know that she was with child. To cover up the sin, David made sure that her husband was killed in battle and then took Bathsheba as his own wife.

It was a neat and tidy plan. And David would have gotten away with his crime - except for God...

What David had done was evil in the sight of the Lord. The Lord revealed David's sin to the prophet Nathan, who roundly rebuked his king (a risky thing to do!). Nathan then told David that part of the judgment from God for his sin would be that the child born to Bathsheba would die (2 Samuel 12:15-23).

Well, the child did die - but God was not through with David. Grace shines through the stories of the Bible, and grace shines in the way He dealt with David and Bathsheba. They would produce another child, a son.

What a Legacy!

[2 Samuel 12:24] Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba, and went in to her and lay with her; and she gave birth to a son, and he named him Solomon. Now the Lord loved him [25] and sent word through Nathan the prophet, and he named him Jedidiah for the Lord's sake.

This son of David and Bathsheba has two names, one a royal nickname; another, his official birth certificate name.

"Solomon" was the nickname given by David. The word derives from the Hebrew word for peace - Shalom. Clearly, David's hope and dream was that, in contrast to his own life of warfare and violence, his son will experience and lead the nation in peace.

"Jedidiah" was the name God chose for the child. In my Bible, off to the side, in the margin, is a note indicating the meaning of Jedidiah. You may have a similar note. Jedidiah means "beloved of the Lord."

Every time David talked with his son, the boy would hear his father call him "*peaceful one*." Every time his mother called him home for dinner, he would hear, "*Supper is ready, beloved of the Lord*."

You get the definite sense that good things are to come to Solomon from the very beginning of his life. He is the child of the king, descended from the right lineage to become king in his father's place. He is especially loved by God, and carries the nickname, "peaceful one."

And sure enough, Solomon did become king of Israel! One of the first scenes in the book of 1 Kings takes us to David's death bed, where the old king is transferring the throne to his son, Solomon.

¹ While Israel's first great king, David was not Israel's first king. That distinction goes to Saul. But, Saul was a Jewish king who did not fear the Lord. After Saul turned from following God, the Spirit was removed from Saul's life and God prepared the way for David to become king in Saul's place.

Solomon - The Road to the Throne (1 Kings 1-2)

A Charge to Keep (1 Kings 2:1-9)²

David's charge to Solomon was, *"Follow the Lord!"*

In the charge to Solomon, David gave some specific guidance as to how he should tread certain people. He told Solomon to build a house for the Lord!³

And at the end of this charge, just before he died, he placed Solomon over all Israel as King.⁴

² [1 Kings 2:1] *As David's time to die drew near, he charged Solomon his son, saying, [2] "I am going the way of all the earth. Be strong, therefore, and show yourself a man. [3] "Keep the charge of the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commandments, His ordinances, and His testimonies, according to what is written in the Law of Moses, that you may succeed in all that you do and wherever you turn, [4] so that the Lord may carry out His promise which He spoke concerning me, saying, 'If your sons are careful of their way, to walk before Me in truth with all their heart and with all their soul, you shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel.'* [5] *"Now you also know what Joab the son of Zeruiah did to me, what he did to the two commanders of the armies of Israel, to Abner the son of Ner, and to Amasa the son of Jether, whom he killed; he also shed the blood of war in peace. And he put the blood of war on his belt about his waist, and on his sandals on his feet. [6] "So act according to your wisdom, and do not let his gray hair go down to Sheol in peace. [7] "But show kindness to the sons of Barzillai the Gileadite, and let them be among those who eat at your table; for they assisted me when I fled from Absalom your brother. [8] "Behold, there is with you Shimei the son of Gera the Benjamite, of Bahurim; now it was he who cursed me with a violent curse on the day I went to Mahanaim. But when he came down to me at the Jordan, I swore to him by the Lord, saying, 'I will not put you to death with the sword.'* [9] *"Now therefore, do not let him go unpunished, for you are a wise man; and you will know what you ought to do to him, and you will bring his gray hair down to Sheol with blood."*

³ David himself had provided much of the building materials necessary for the construction, and drew up the plans for the temple. He had not been allowed to build the Temple, though, because he was a man of bloodshed.

⁴ Before he had firmly established his reign, though, Solomon had to deal with a rival to the throne. This was an older half-brother, Adonijah. Adonijah attempted to usurp the throne early in Solomon's reign, and the young king proves equal to the task. The story is recorded in 1 Kings 2:19-27.

Before getting to the exploits of Solomon, let's note that he had some housecleaning to take care of before his reign could be secure and stable.

A Kingdom to Confirm

You and I may be tempted to believe that "sleaze" in government is a twentieth or twenty-first century invention. A broader historical perspective assures us that wherever there is wealth and power, sleaze is usually not far away.

If it is present in the halls of power in most nations and cities today, it was also present in the court of Israelite power twenty five hundred years ago. And one of Solomon's first tasks was to purge sleazy people from his government.

He got rid of Joab, a sleazy military leader and replaced him with Benaiah. He put to death the sleazy Shimei, who had cursed Solomon's father, David. And, he executed the sleazy Adonijah, a pretender to the throne.

With these purges effected, Solomon's kingdom is secure. All is set for a long and successful reign – if he can just stay on track, if he can stay undistracted.

When Solomon became king, he was a young man. And he was a young man with enough sense to realize that he was going to need help. So, in response to an offer of help from God, Solomon asked for the help that only God could provide.

Solomon - A Wise and Godly King (1 Kings 3-10)

Solomon's One Request of God: WISDOM

[1 Kings 3:3] Now Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David, except he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places. [4] The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the great high place; Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. [5] In Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream at night; and God said, "Ask what you wish me to give you."

Think of all the things for which Solomon could have asked: long life, riches, the lives of his enemies, unlimited pleasure. If God came to you and told you to ask for anything, what would you ask for...?

I'm impressed that Solomon didn't ask for any of these things.

[1 Kings 3:7] “Now, O Lord my God, You have made Your servant king in place of my father David, yet I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. [8] “Your servant is in the midst of Your people which You have chosen, a great people who are too many to be numbered or counted. [9] “So give Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people to discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?”

Of all the things Solomon needed, this - WISDOM - was the one critical thing he needed. Skillful decision making ability, good common horse sense. That's what he needed and that's what he asked for.

At that request, God must have smiled. What a great request! It was a request God was more than happy to grant - and He did give Solomon that “understanding heart” he prayed for.

This - **wisdom** - was the basis for all of Solomon's great success as a leader, as a king, and as a man of God. And the breadth and scope of Solomon's wisdom is simply remarkable.

We see his wisdom in the way he walked with God.

The Breadth of Solomon's Wisdom

Solomon's Spiritual Integrity

We read in 1 Kings 3:3 that ***Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David.***⁵

⁵ There is only one negative comment relative to the spiritual discipline of Solomon in his early years, and that is that he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places - and this is explained on account of there being no Temple in which to burn sacrifices. (1 Kings 3:2)

Solomon always rushed to the head of the line when it came to making sacrifices to the Lord. He always made more sacrifices than were necessary. He was an extravagant worshipper.

Solomon's prayer of dedication at the completion of the temple building project was a model of someone who prays from the heart to God.

The Lord was pleased to converse with Solomon on at least three occasions. First, when He told Solomon to ask whatever he wished from God. (1 Kings 3) Second, when He gave Solomon promises about the blessings that would come when he built the Temple. (1 Kings 6) Third, when He warned Solomon about the curses that would come on the nation if they every strayed. (1 Kings 9)

To be an enthusiastic worshipper is a sure sign of wisdom. (After all, the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord - Proverbs 9:10) And given that measure, Solomon was truly wise. But Solomon's wisdom is evident in **every** arena of life.

Solomon's administrative genius

His father, David, was not, first and foremost, an administrator. He was a warrior. So, there is no telling what shape the nation was in when Solomon came to power. But, Solomon had skill in administration. He chose people who would lead with wisdom.⁶

Then, because of his administrative genius, the borders of Israel were expanded to the largest they had ever been, spanning the territory from the Euphrates River to the north and east, to the Mediterranean Sea to the west and all the way to Egypt in the south.⁷

Solomon led in a few key military victories (see 2 Chronicles 8) and oversaw the construction of strategically placed storehouses in case of emergency.

⁶ 1 Kings 4 does nothing but list the officers in his kingdom.

⁷ While this is not a huge territory by today's standards, oversight of such a kingdom would be difficult in an era of no modern technology. Great administrative skill would be required to rule such an area well.

And, of course, among Solomon's major masterpieces were the twin building projects of the Temple and the Royal Palace.

Solomon, as builder

The Solomonic Temple

The Temple required seven years to construct, and had been prepared for, in large part, by Solomon's father, David, who also charged him with building the Temple.

When it came time to actually build, Solomon levied taxes from the Israelites, and used both foreign and domestic forced labor to get the temple construction under way.

It was built on the model of the Tabernacle that the Israelites had carried around with them in the wilderness - only the Temple was much larger and incredibly ornate.

At the end of the time of construction, Solomon held a dedication service. Innumerable sacrifices were offered and the glory of the Lord filled the Temple, indicating that He was indeed pleased with what Solomon had built.⁸

⁸ More about the Temple... Silence was the word during construction, as we read in 1 Kings 6:7 - ***The house, while it was being built, was built of stone prepared at the quarry, and there was neither hammer nor axe nor any iron tool heard in the house while it was being built.*** Solomon dealt with Hiram of Tyre in procuring supplies for the construction project. It was built with a work force of 70,000 men to carry loads, and 80,000 men to quarry stone. It was built on Mount Moriah, where God had appeared to David, and where, centuries before, Abraham had almost sacrificed his son, Isaac. Foundation stones for the temple were of two sizes - big and bigger. They were either 12 ft. square, or 14 ft. square. The temple was about 180 feet long, and about 30 feet wide. It had a porch in front of the temple proper that was 30 feet square. The inside of the temple was overlaid with gold throughout. All the wood trim work was in cypress and cedar wood (can you imagine how that must have smelled?) The outside of the temple was impressive, but a sense of the majesty of God would have been overpowering as you entered the building. (1 Kings 5-10; 1 Chronicles 22,23,29; 2 Chronicles 1-9) Two cherubim made of olive wood (a hardwood with beautiful grains) with wingspans of 15 ft. apiece, and ten ft. high, and overlaid with gold, located in the Holy of Holies, hovering over the Ark of the Covenant. Doors throughout were of olive wood. Intricate engravings throughout the building. Bronze work was

Then, Solomon oversaw the construction of his own palace. And that little construction project was nothing to sneeze at, either!

Solomon's palace

It took thirteen years to build the palace, and was called "The House of the Forest of Lebanon" because it was constructed with the cedars of Lebanon. Among the notable elements of the house were an outrageously beautiful throne room and two hundred large shields of beaten gold (used just for decoration)!⁹

In addition to his building projects, Solomon accumulated legendary wealth.

Solomon's astounding wealth.

We are told that the provisions for one day at Solomon's court consisted of 300 bushels of flour, 600 bushels of meal, 30 oxen, 100 sheep and many other animals including wild game and fowl. (1 Kings 4:22-23)

He had 40,000 stalls for his royal horses and kept 12,000 horsemen. 666 talents of gold were brought into his kingdom on a yearly basis from the other kingdoms who paid tribute to him. (This was an enormous amount of money - nearly impossible to calculate in terms of today's currency.)

A fleet of ships was provided for Solomon's use. Every three years the ships set sail to bring the world's bounty back to Israel - gold and silver, peacocks, apes, and ivory. (1 Kings 10:22)

All the drinking vessels of Solomon were of gold. (1 Kings 10:21) The Bible tells us that silver was not considered valuable during the days of Solomon.

Consider, too, Solomon's wise insight into life, as evidenced by his writings.

accomplished by a skilled craftsman named Hiram. The bronze sea - stood on the backs of twelve cast bronze oxen; held over 10,000 gallons of water. There were (literally) tons of utensils, and other basins, and bronzework throughout the rest of the temple precincts.

⁹ His throne was made of ivory and overlaid with gold. 12 carved lions stood at the six steps leading up to his throne.

Solomon's even-handed advice-giving

You almost get the sense that Solomon walked through his day spouting out wise sayings. The book of 1 Kings tells us that he came up with thousand of them, many of them recorded for us in the book of Proverbs. He was also the author of the Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes.

And, then, his firm grip on life is seen, too, in his broad knowledge and skills in life, generally.

Solomon's wisdom seen general knowledge and skills

He knew all about nature. He's the kind of guy you would have loved to have with you on a walk through the woods or on the beach. He had wonderful observation skills - nothing passed by him unnoticed, and he could draw from the natural world practical lessons for daily living.

His wisdom included a specific knowledge of nature: he knew all about various types of trees, animals, birds, insects, and fish

He had great musical ability, composing over one thousand songs.

And, finally, the wisdom of Solomon was also evident in the justice of his rule.

Solomon's ability to make great decisions

Right off the bat, the young king showed a keen understanding of the human heart when he was approached by two women (both prostitutes) who were having an argument. (read the story at 1 Kings 3:16-28)

Both women had recently borne sons, but one of the sons had died in the night. One woman accused the other woman of switching the sons, giving her the dead child and stealing her own living son.

The first woman denied doing this, and protested that the other woman's son was the one who had died.

They came to Solomon seeking justice. Obviously, one of the women was lying - but how would Solomon find out which one?

[24] The king said, "Get me a sword." So they brought a sword before the king. [25] The king said, "Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one and half to the other." [26] Then the woman whose child was the living one spoke to the king, for she was deeply stirred over her son and said, "Oh, my lord, give her the living child, and by no means kill him." But the other said, "He shall be neither mine nor yours; divide him!" [27] Then the king said, "Give the first woman the living child, and by no means kill him. She is his mother."

Pretty wise!

Summary:

Here is the Bible's summary of Solomon's early years as king of Israel: ***[1 Kings 4:25] So Judah and Israel lived in safety, every man under his vine and his fig tree, from Dan even to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon.***

And here is the Bible's assessment of Solomon's wisdom: ***[1 Kings 4:29] Now God gave Solomon wisdom and very great discernment and breadth of mind, like the sand that is on the seashore. [30] Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. [31] For he was wiser than all men...***

Solomon's breadth of knowledge, his grasp of situations and personalities, his intuition and foresight, his intellectual grasp and intelligence simply marked him out as a man set apart, specially gifted by God.

Solomon had an almost unparalleled beginning in life, and was uniquely blessed by God. What incredible potential for good.

But, then, something happened. Somewhere along about mid-life - in the years straddling maturity, he followed a few dangerous rabbit trails. He got distracted.

The Bible includes these detours for our benefit. We see Solomon's dark side, as we have seen his glory, from the book of 1 Kings. We'll see that the same Solomon, the young king who began so well, who was solid as steel for God at the outset, had feet of clay.

The first muddy part of Solomon's character that becomes evident is his gross materialism. This aspect of Solomon's character was evident throughout his life and was manifested in a number of ways.

Solomon - Feet of Mud

Solomon's Gross Materialism

For instance, there is reason to pause and consider the gaudy ostentatiousness of his palace. What does the design of his throne, the placement of the ivory lions leading up to the throne (which you know I love), the decorative golden shields, and the overabundance of gold throughout the palace tell us about the man?

What can we discover about a man who taxed his people beyond their means to carry out his grandiose building programs?

What does it tell us that it required seven years to build a Temple for God - and thirteen years to build his own home?¹⁰

Why, when Scripture specifically cautions against multiplying horses (because of the prideful ness an accumulation of these fine beasts prompt), would Solomon have built stalls for forty thousand horses?¹¹

My answer to these questions? I think in Solomon we have a man who was lacking contentment, addicted to materialism, and willing to sacrifice others to promote a showy lifestyle.

In addition to materialism, Solomon held very loose reins on his heart and passions. In chapter 11 of 1 Kings, we read that *"he loved many foreign women."*

¹⁰ Many commentators believe that does in fact point up a problem in priorities.

¹¹ In speaking about how the future kings of Israel should behave, Moses instructs the people, Deuteronomy 17:16 - *"Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, since the Lord has said to you, 'You shall never again return that way.'"*

Solomon's Unbridled Lust (11:1)

Granted, many of Solomon's marriages were entered into for purely political reasons. He saw them as necessary for strengthening his kingdom. Having wives from other kingdoms brought stability to Israel. I'm not saying it was right to have married many women. But a certain amount of it was commonly done in the ancient world and is understandable from a political standpoint.¹²

But Solomon's excesses point to a problem. In addition to his seven hundred wives, he kept three hundred concubines, women who lived to serve the pleasure of the king.

There is no way to read the story of Solomon's relationship with women other than to come away with the sense that here is a man without self-control. He willingly gave in to the satisfaction of his every passion and lust - and seemed to believe that it was his God-given right to do so!

Solomon's distractedness was triangular. It was comprised of a slide into greed, which led to a turn at immorality. The final turn was his turn away from the God who had blessed him from birth.

Solomon's Apostasy (11:4)

[1 Kings 11:1] Now King Solomon loved many foreign women¹³ along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, [2] from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the sons of Israel, "You shall not associate with them, nor shall they associate with you, for they will surely turn your heart away after their gods." Solomon held fast to these in love. [3] He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart away. [4] For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been.

¹² Solomon's marriage to the daughter of Pharaoh was one of these marriages, and indicates that his empire was superior even to that of the Egyptians.

¹³ In the Old Testament, men were not prohibited from marrying foreign women - except for Canaanite intermarriage, which was expressly forbidden. But the foreign women they married had to have renounced their allegiance to false gods. Solomon didn't seem to care which gods his wives worshipped. He married them and loved them, regardless.

[5] FOR SOLOMON WENT AFTER ASHTORETH THE GODDESS OF THE SIDONIANS AND AFTER MILCOM THE DETESTABLE IDOL OF THE AMMONITES. [6] Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not follow the Lord fully, as David his father had done. [7] THEN SOLOMON BUILT A HIGH PLACE FOR CHEMOSH THE DETESTABLE IDOL OF MOAB, ON THE MOUNTAIN WHICH IS EAST OF JERUSALEM, AND FOR MOLECH THE DETESTABLE IDOL OF THE SONS OF AMMON. [8] Thus also he did for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods.

Solomon accommodated himself to his many wives worship practices, building temples for the worship of their foreign gods.

And then he actually participated in the worship of these gods:

- **Ashteroth** - worship of Ashteroth was widely practiced throughout the ancient Near East; worship included crude sexual practices and astrology;
- **Milcom** - the national god of Ammon; built the high place on the Mount of Olives, just outside of Jerusalem;
- **Chemosh** - the national god of Moab; associated with astrology; a savage war god, always depicted as being anti-Israelite;
- **Molech** - often involved human/child sacrifice by throwing them into a fire (“passing through the fire”);

Idolatry found its way into Israel, via Solomon’s bedroom.¹⁴

So we hear about this side of Solomon and wonder, “*Are we talking about the same man? It THIS the wisest man who ever lived?*”

Yep.

Here was a man with the world on a string. Having tasted unparalleled blessing from God, he still felt a hunger to taste the delicacies offered by a world that rejected the God who had blessed him.

Solomon - A Case Study in the Quest for Meaning...

(or “What went wrong with Solomon?”)

Now, what I would prefer to NOT do at this point is to turn this message into a morality lesson, as in, “*Look at what Solomon did. Don’t do that!*”

On the one hand, that would certainly be an appropriate comment to make. It is a tragedy when a person ends up giving in to materialistic excess or to immorality, or when someone turns his or her back on the Lord.

But we can do more with Solomon’s spectacular failure than point our fingers at a bad example.

We can ask questions, questions that might shine light on the workings of Solomon’s heart, might give understanding of the condition of the human soul, and just might provide insight into our own heart condition. Questions like these come to mind:

- What is it that prompts a person who is gifted and blessed by God to turn aside from God?
- What is lacking in someone’s life that would drive them to behave contrary to what is the known will of God?
- What is someone seeking when he or she wanders away from what they know is wisdom?

The Search for SIGNIFICANCE

When Solomon spent years and years and untold amounts of cash to build monuments to his own glory, wasn’t he screaming at the universe, “*I am important! I matter! I’m not insignificant!*”?

We hunger and thirst to matter. We want to believe that we count for something and can’t live with the thought that we are a nothing but a faceless cog in a machine. We are people of worth. We know it instinctively and will sacrifice time, money and the people we love to prove it to ourselves and to others.

¹⁴ It was not that he ever altogether abandoned worship of the true God - he simply adopted a syncretistic style of worship that included a whole pantheon of other gods.

The Search for FREEDOM

When Solomon gave in to his base desires for sex, wasn't he asserting his right to find happiness in whatever way HE wanted?

Frank Sinatra's mantra, "*I did it my way*" was Solomon's, too. I can relate. I often want what I want when I want it the way it want it. And I can be pretty demanding. In our society (in other societies, perhaps, too, but I know ours best), there is a Solomon-like addiction to pleasure. And it is not merely sensuality that is behind our addiction. It is a hunger for freedom. We want to be masters of our own universe, captains of our own ships.

The pursuit of pleasure is empowering. And, like Solomon, we may be tempted to do whatever it takes to find the pleasure we seek.

The Search for TRANSCENDENCE

When Solomon turned to other gods, what was going on? I suspect it was more than a convenient compromise to please his wives' religious preferences. He was looking for something.

Solomon tried it all. Virtually every possible religious preference of his day got his attention. He had tasted the real thing, the faith of Israel that presented God reaching down to a lost humanity. Not satisfied with that, he experimented with religions that tried to reach up to the divine. His experiments were all about transcendence.

As we will hear him say in Ecclesiastes, God "*has set eternity*" in our hearts. Like Solomon, we today know that there is something out there, something beyond us. We hunger for connection with that transcendent something. And, if we reject the God revealed to us in creation, in history, and in Scripture, we will turn to whatever options our culture offers us, from New Age mysticism to cafeteria-style "make up your own religion" to a vast array of cults to other religions.

Conclusion:

The Solomon we encounter in the Bible is a man who had about the broadest experience of life imaginable. He sought significance with incredible single-mindedness, freedom with fearlessness, and transcendence with passion.

And at the end of his searching, he sat down to write a book: **Ecclesiastes.**

Beginning next Sunday, we'll start to unpackage this remarkable book. And the exploration will be helpful, I believe, to anyone dealing with the big-ticket issues of life.

Please prepare your own heart for our time in Ecclesiastes. God's Word will blow meaning and purpose into the sails of your soul if you are receptive to it. If you have friends who are grappling with the big stuff - Why am I here? What's the purpose to it all? What's life all about? - they could find just what they are hungering for from the words of Solomon, a wise old man who had been there, done that.