

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR DECEMBER 5

### 1 KINGS 3:3-15

#### THE BACKGROUND

King David reigned 40 years (1 Chron. 29:27). People remembered David as a great king who loved the Lord and did his best to serve Him. However, the inspired biblical writer didn't whitewash David's record as though he did no wrong. In 2 Samuel 11, the story of David's affair with Bathsheba proved to be the lowest point of his life. From that time forward David's life was filled with turmoil until his death. However, God was at work even in the dark times of David's life. The first son born to David and Bathsheba died, but they had another son named Solomon (2 Sam. 12:15-25). God sent Nathan the prophet to tell David the boy (also called Jedidiah, meaning "beloved of the Lord") a wonderful testimony of God's compassion and forgiveness. As we shall see, God had great plans for Solomon.

#### 1. CHARACTER IS WORSHIP (1 KINGS 3:3-5)

**Verse 3:** *Solomon loved the LORD by walking in the statutes of his father David, but he also sacrificed and burned incense on the high places.*

The opening words of this verse — Solomon loved the LORD — form a powerful statement about the young king's early devotion to God. The word "loved" renders a Hebrew verb used in other contexts to describe God's unlimited affectionate concern for His people. In this verse, the word attests to Solomon's covenant faithfulness to the Lord as prescribed in Deuteronomy 6:5, where the same verb occurs. The reference to God as "the LORD" also carries theological significance since "LORD" is the translation of the Hebrew word often written in English as "Yahweh", the covenant name for God. Thus, Solomon initially turned his full attention toward following the spiritual advice David gave him about following the Lord (2:1-3). He previously carried out the full implications of his father's practical advice to rid himself of his political enemies. Solomon had Adonijah, Joab, and Shimei killed, and he banished Abiathar.

True love and devotion to the Lord always manifests itself in tangible actions. Solomon initially demonstrated his love for Yahweh by walking in the statutes of his father David. This way of describing Solomon's lifestyle

indicates he followed the Lord wholeheartedly just as his father had done before him.

Solomon sacrificed and burned incense on the high places, an action for which later kings would be censured. The word "but" hints at a future problem in Solomon's faithfulness to the Lord. At this point, however, Solomon was not reprimanded for sacrificing and burning incense on the high places because the worship center at Shiloh had been destroyed and the temple had not yet been built. Later the high places would become completely associated with pagan worship (2 Kings 17:11). Although David had moved the ark of the Lord to Jerusalem, the tabernacle remained stationed at the high place at Gibeon (2 Chron. 1:3-6), and at this time no evidence indicates Solomon was worshiping in a manner that the Lord disapproved. In fact, the Lord was about to reveal Himself to Solomon at this significant high place at Gibeon (1 Kings 3:4).

Worshippers at the high places sacrificed animals in accordance with the Law in Leviticus 1-7. They also burned incense in compliance with the Law of Moses (Ex. 25:6). Thus at this point Solomon is portrayed as demonstrating his love for the Lord by complying with Moses' Law.

**Verse 4:** *The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there because it was the most famous high place. He offered 1,000 burnt offerings on that altar.*

Solomon journeyed approximately seven miles northwest from Jerusalem to Gibeon because it was the most famous high place. Though our present passage does not indicate why Gibeon was the most famous high place, the parallel passage in 2 Chronicles 1:4-5 indicates the Lord's tabernacle and the bronze altar made by Bezalel, the great artisan of Moses' time, was located at Gibeon. No doubt the presence of these revered articles of worship made Gibeon the preferred high place. To see the tabernacle and the bronze altar was to step back in time to when God first gave the Law to Moses.

Once at Gibeon, Solomon sacrificed 1,000 burnt offerings on that altar. The mention of 1,000 sacrifices is just the beginning of a marvelous display of wealth and abundance. Neither is the reference to that altar accidental. Solomon offered his massive gifts to the Lord on the altar built in Moses' time.

**Verse 5:** *At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream at night. God said, "Ask. What should I give you?"*

Solomon's display of affection for the Lord obviously pleased Him. During the night, the Lord appeared to him in a dream just as He had done with Jacob (Gen. 28:10-15).

The purpose of God's appearance was to affirm the correctness of Solomon's actions. The young king had put the Lord first by worshiping Him and by walking in His ways as his father David had done. The Lord commanded Solomon to ask what He should give to him. God understood what Solomon was seeking by going to the high place at Gibeon. Solomon remembered David's advice to seek the Lord always. His trip to Gibeon confirmed his intention to follow his father's leading.

#### 2. CHARACTER IS SURRENDER (1 KINGS 3:6-8)

**Verse 6:** *And Solomon replied, "You have shown great and faithful love to Your servant, my father David, because he walked before You in faithfulness, righteousness, and integrity. You have continued this great and faithful love for him by giving him a son to sit on his throne, as it is today.*

Solomon responded by recognizing the special covenant existing between the Lord and David. Solomon began his response by acknowledging the Lord's great and faithful love. This phrase includes the significant word "chesed [KEE sid]," rendered "faithful love." The passage is saturated with covenant language. In effect, Solomon was acknowledging that to be king in Israel meant one was in covenant relationship with the Lord. The stability and strength of the king's reign was inseparably bound to his faithfulness to the covenant. Thus every accomplishment Solomon achieved was attributable to God's blessings on him for covenant loyalty. The true praise belongs to God.

David's walk before the Lord was characterized by three things. First, David walked in faithfulness. This term derives from a verb meaning "to confirm," "to support," or "to uphold." Since David upheld God's law and confirmed the Lord's ways in his personal walk, the Lord viewed him as being dependable or faithful. Second, David walked in righteousness. The basic connotation of this term is one of conforming to a moral or an ethical standard. David made the conscious choice to conform his life to God's ways. Third, David walked in integrity. This final term served as the foundation for the other two as it referred to the

uprightness of David's heart toward God.

David's godly lifestyle resulted in the Lord's keeping this great and faithful love for him. His lifestyle also resulted in Solomon's sitting on David's throne. This point is important to emphasize because even when Solomon acted unfaithfully, God remembered His covenant with David.

**Verse 7:** *"LORD my God, You have now made Your servant king in my father David's place. Yet I am just a youth with no experience in leadership."*

Having acknowledged God's faithfulness, Solomon went to the heart of his fear. He was a youth with no experience in leadership. The word youth renders the literal Hebrew phrase "an insignificant lad," a revealing glimpse into Solomon's innermost feelings. As a young man, Solomon felt overwhelmed to have assumed such heavy responsibilities. The added qualifier with no experience in leadership is graphically depicted by the Hebrew expression "I do not know to go out or to come in." How could Solomon be expected to lead his people if he did not know what to do? The issue of how to lead God's people was his biggest challenge.

**Verse 8:** *Your servant is among Your people You have chosen, a people too numerous to be numbered or counted.*

Solomon not only felt apprehensive because of his youth and lack of experience, he felt the weight of leading the people God Himself had chosen, a reference to their covenantal relationship with the Lord. The description of the people as being too numerous to be numbered or counted attests to God's faithfulness to His promise to multiply them. The growth of the nation was a major part of God's promise to Abram (Gen. 12:2).

### 3. CHARACTER IS RECEIVING (1 KINGS 3:9-14)

**Verse 9:** *So give Your servant an obedient heart to judge Your people and to discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?"*

How could Solomon meet so formidable a challenge as to lead God's great people? He asked the Lord to give him an obedient heart, or more literally "a hearing heart." Solomon asked God to sensitize his heart so he could hear and heed God's directions for His people. One result would be the ability to discern between good and evil. This ability related directly to doing God's will. Therefore, to discern ... good meant to know what actions

pleased God with a view toward doing them. Conversely, to discern ... evil meant to know what actions displeased God with a view toward avoiding them. Solomon underscored the necessity of guidance on God's part and a sensitive heart on his part by asking, "Who is able to judge this great people of Yours?"

Because of his weighty leadership responsibilities, Solomon asked the Lord for the ability to judge rightly, discerning between good and evil.

**Verses 10-11:** *Now it pleased the Lord that Solomon had requested this. So God said to him, "Because you have requested this and did not ask for long life or riches for yourself, or the death of your enemies, but you asked discernment for yourself to understand justice,*

God explained the reason for His pleasure with Solomon. The young king could've asked selfishly for a longer life, great wealth, and the death of his enemies.

All these requests have two things in common. First, they're all logical from a human point of view. After all, a young king who enjoyed a long life of riches free from the worry of his enemies would be truly blessed, right? Not necessarily.

Second, all three of these requests leave faith in and dependence on the Lord out of the equation. Solomon's request for a listening heart to discern what pleased God (good) and what did not please Him (evil) revealed the young king's faith in the Lord's guidance and his dependence on Him.

**Verse 12:** *I will therefore do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and understanding heart, so that there has never been anyone like you before and never will be again.*

God was so pleased with Solomon that He granted his request. He promised to give the young king a wise and understanding heart. In general terms, Solomon would possess the God-given ability to understand God's will and to apply it in practical ways on a daily basis. Solomon would be so distinguished in this regard that God declared no one before and no one after him would approach his status in regards to this ability.

**Verse 13:** *In addition, I will give you what you did not ask for: both riches and honor, so that no man in any kingdom will be your equal during your entire life.*

In a display of His great unmerited favor, God also declared He would give Solomon the things he did not ask for, summarized here as riches and honor. No man in

Solomon's lifetime would approach his wealth or fame.

**Verse 14:** *If you walk in My ways and keep My statutes and commandments just as your father David did, I will give you a long life.*

God also made a conditional promise to Solomon signified by the word "if." If Solomon followed David's lead in walking in the ways of the Lord, God promised to grant him a long life. As we consider the exchange between the Lord and Solomon, we discover that Solomon made a good request of God not with a manipulative motive but because he sincerely sought the Lord's help. The blessings of long life, wealth, and honor were granted by God as a display of His graciousness. Solomon sought to please God, and God responded with great blessing.

### 4. CHARACTER IS CELEBRATION (1 KINGS 3:15)

**Verse 15:** *Then Solomon woke up and realized it had been a dream. He went to Jerusalem, stood before the ark of the Lord's covenant, and offered burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. Then he held a feast for all his servants.*

Solomon awoke to discover the vivid experience he had with the Lord was a dream. To his credit, Solomon didn't discount the validity of the encounter with the Lord just because the Lord appeared to him in a dream. Instead, he returned to Jerusalem and stood before the ark of the Lord's covenant. At Gibeon, he had stood before the tabernacle constructed in the time of Moses; in Jerusalem he stationed himself before the visible symbol of God's presence and covenant with Israel, the ark. Solomon visibly demonstrated his commitment to walk in the Lord's statutes, for the ark contained the stone tablets bearing the Ten Commandments.

Solomon enjoyed peace, experienced the flow of God's wisdom through his words and writings, and ruled over the kingdom of God's people during a time of great glory for the nation. Money couldn't buy any of the blessings God freely bestowed.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR DECEMBER 12

### 1 KINGS 8:22-43

#### THE BACKGROUND

The immediate impulse to build God a house derived from David's conviction that the Lord's house should be greater than his own (2 Sam. 7). God didn't allow David to build a house for Him, but He blessed David with a promise to build his dynasty. God also promised to lift up David's son saying, "He will build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam. 7:13). Thus Solomon built the temple as a fulfillment of God's promise to David. However, the building of the temple was part of a much larger plan God had for His people, a plan predating David by centuries.

Moses announced the Lord would choose a place "to put His name for His dwelling" (Deut. 12:5). Based on 1 Kings 6:1, some scholars date the exodus from Egypt in 1446 B.C. Solomon began building the temple around 966 B.C. Though Solomon set out to do what his father had desired to do, in reality, he was taking part in a historical process directed by God for 480 years.

#### 1. BECAUSE WE REMEMBER (1 KINGS 8:22-24)

**Verse 22:** *Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in front of the entire congregation of Israel and spread out his hands toward heaven.*

Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD. Sometime shortly after he began praying, Solomon apparently changed his prayer posture from standing to kneeling as he petitioned God (8:54). Throughout the prayer, Solomon spread out his hands toward heaven, a posture of appeal and anticipation. The altar near his position was 30 feet wide, 30 feet long, and 15 feet high (2 Chron. 4:1), and was used for burning the sacrificial animals as offerings to the Lord.

Appropriately, Solomon's prayer, seeking God's attentiveness and His forgiveness when the people sinned, was spoken at the place where atonement was effected through sacrifice. Approximately a millennium later, Jesus, who gave Himself as the ultimate sacrifice, emphasized that the temple was a "house of prayer" by quoting from Isaiah 56:7 (Luke 19:45-46).

**Verse 23:** *He said: LORD God of Israel, there is no God like You in heaven above or on earth below, keeping the gracious covenant with Your servants who walk before You with their whole heart.*

Solomon began his prayer by acknowledging God's uniqueness: "There is no God like You." Solomon described God's uniqueness in terms of His faithfulness in keeping the gracious covenant with those who chose to walk before Him with their whole heart. The word "heart" appears in the singular with the plural possessive "their." This construction calls attention to the corporate nature of the covenant community. One's value wasn't measured in terms of a rugged individualism, but rather in terms of one's support of the covenant community. God had always been faithful to His covenant people. Therefore, Solomon could approach God in prayer because He is faithful.

**Verse 24:** *You have kept what You promised to Your servant, my father David. You spoke directly to him and You fulfilled Your promise by Your power as it is today.*

Solomon illustrated God's faithfulness by acknowledging to the Lord, "You have kept what You promised." For Solomon, God's faithfulness was of personal interest in that God had kept His promises to his father David. Solomon's statement, "You fulfilled Your promise by Your power as it is today" referred to Solomon's reigning as king and to his building the temple. Solomon also tied God's faithfulness in fulfilling His promises to His power, a translation of the Hebrew phrase "hand." Thus, Solomon spread his hands toward the One who had faithfully fulfilled His promises.

#### 2. BECAUSE HE LISTENS (1 KINGS 3:8:27-28)

**Verse 27:** *But will God indeed live on earth? Even heaven, the highest heaven, cannot contain You, much less this temple I have built.*

After requesting God's continued faithfulness to keep David's descendants on the throne (1 Kings 8:25-26), Solomon focused on the reality that God was far too great and glorious to dwell in the temple he had built. The king's question, "Will God indeed live on earth?" emphasized both the magnificence of the Lord and the inadequacy of the temple. The phrase "heaven, the highest heaven" refers to the vastness of heaven, which still couldn't contain God. The temple Solomon built

was, by comparison, infinitely inferior in size and scope to heaven. Since this inferiority was the case, how could Solomon believe God would listen to the prayers made in this place? Solomon's acknowledgment of the temple's inadequacy enabled him to trust God's past dealings with His people as a guide for future relationships. God would listen to the prayers because of His greatness, not because of the temple's greatness. God didn't need the temple; rather, the worshipers at the temple needed God.

**Verse 28:** *Listen to Your servant's prayer and his petition, LORD my God, so that You may hear the cry and the prayer that Your servant prays before You today,*

Solomon directly petitioned God to listen to his prayer and to hear the cry and the prayer he was offering that day. The king made his request by twice referring to himself as God's servant in this verse. Perhaps at this moment in his prayer, Solomon fell to his knees, realizing he could approach God only in a posture of total humility and servitude. Yet God could be expected to listen because He had promised to David that this house would be built and He knew its inadequacies before the first stone was put in place. Solomon continued to plead for the Lord to hear his prayers and the prayers of His people (1 Kings 8:29-30).

Solomon prayed using a variety of specific scenarios for which he wanted the Lord to respond to the prayers of His people (see 1 Kings 8:31-53). He asked the Lord to reply graciously when His people turned to Him in prayerful confession and repentance. When Solomon finished praying, the Lord in fact responded with a promise to be present and to hear the prayers offered to Him by humble people (1 Kings 9:3; 2 Chron. 7:14).

#### 3. BECAUSE HE RESPONDS (1 KINGS 8:38-39)

**Verse 38:** *whatever prayer or petition anyone from Your people Israel might have—each man knowing his own afflictions and spreading out his hands toward this temple—*

Solomon specifically requested God's attention to prayers at times when a person sinned against his neighbor, when Israel was defeated by an enemy, when there was drought, and when there was famine (1 Kings 8:31-37). He then offered a general plea for God to respond to whatever prayer or petition anyone ... might have. At this point in his prayer, Solomon was concerned primarily with the prayers from God's people Israel.

Interestingly, he mentioned the same prayer posture of spreading out his hands but replaces the earlier phrase “toward heaven” (see 8:22) with the words “toward this temple.” This wording probably indicated Solomon’s belief that the temple was the supreme place of God’s presence on earth. Even those who couldn’t travel to Jerusalem and stand in the temple court could pray toward this temple.

**Verse 39:** *may You hear in heaven, Your dwelling place, and may You forgive, act, and repay the man, according to all his ways, since You know his heart, for You alone know every human heart,*

Solomon explicitly asked the Lord to hear, forgive, act, and repay. This piling up of verbs underscores the idea that the Lord is a God who actively interacts with people. He hears their prayers. He alone can forgive their sins. The particular Hebrew verb translated forgive in this verse is used only of God in the Bible. Once God hears and forgives, He will act in the best interests of His people in accordance with His divine will. Prayer is never just a spiritual transaction; prayer has real implications in the daily realities of our lives. When God acts, we’re affected in tangible ways. Solomon’s request for God to repay captures the idea of the fuller phrase “repay the man, according to all his ways.” The request to repay is important because it guards against the idea that people can sin all they want and then have their sins forgiven just by praying to the Lord, only to return to their sins. Because God knows every human heart, He knows whose prayers are offered in genuine humility and sincerity.

Solomon included “the foreigner who is not of Your people Israel” in his prayer (8:41-42). The king’s knowledge of the Lord’s promise to Abraham concerning all the earth’s peoples (Gen. 12:3) likely underpinned this petition. Later, Isaiah recorded the Lord’s desire to welcome all people to know Him and to pray to Him (Isa. 56:6-7). His house would be called “a house of prayer for all nations.”

#### **4. BECAUSE HE’S AVAILABLE TO EVERYONE (1 KINGS 8:43)**

**Verse 43:** *may You hear in heaven, Your dwelling place, and do according to all the foreigner asks You for. Then all the people on earth will know Your name, to fear You as Your people Israel do and know that this temple I have built is called by Your name.*

Solomon appealed for the Lord to hear the prayers of non-Israelites who came to the temple to pray. He prayed as earnestly for the Lord to hear the prayers of the foreigner as he had for Him to hear the prayers of His own people. Solomon believed that when God heard the prayers of foreigners, all the people on earth would come to know the Lord’s name and fear Him.

Solomon also believed the other nations would know this temple he had built was called by the Lord’s name. This strong association of the temple with the Lord’s name marked Solomon’s dedicatory prayer as the fulfillment of God’s promise to Moses to choose a place for His name to dwell (Deut. 12:5,11,21). Even after this prayer, the people of Israel would associate the temple in Jerusalem as the place to go to keep the Lord’s command to appear before Him at the Feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (Ex. 23:14-17).

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR DECEMBER 19 MATTHEW 1:20–2:11

### THE BACKGROUND

Over 400 years passed between the preaching of Malachi, the last prophet of the Old Testament period, and the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. During those four centuries, God's people experienced various challenges. First, they experienced the rigors of reestablishing themselves in the land after returning from exile in Babylon.

Second, the people experienced trials common to all subjugated peoples. Alexander the Great led the Greeks through the promised land en route to Egypt. When Alexander died, the Jewish people were subjected first to the control of the Ptolemies in Egypt and then to the Seleucids in Syria. The latter group, under the leadership of Antiochus IV, tried to force Greek culture on the Jews. Ultimately the Jews rebelled, led by the Maccabees, winning a period of semi-independence for about a century (167-63 B.C.). Then in 63 B.C. the Romans took control and remained in power throughout the entire New Testament period.

Third, the people experienced a growth in the variety of religious expressions of Judaism. The Sadducees and Pharisees, so common in the New Testament, emerged during this time period. Finally, the common people experienced the hardships of life that accompany a subsistence existence marked by servitude to others and almost total illiteracy. Throughout these centuries, the people developed and clung to a belief that one day God would send His Anointed One, the Messiah, to set things right. Under divine inspiration Matthew recognized that Messiah as Jesus!

### 1. THE GRAND DESIGN (MATTHEW 1:20-23)

**Verse 20:** *“Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is by the Holy Spirit.”*

The angel called Joseph by name, indicating the message was specifically for him and revealing how God is in touch with people in a personal way. The title “son of David” reminded Joseph of his messianic lineage. The instruction “don’t be afraid” reveals precisely what Joseph was feeling. He was afraid of disrepute coming upon Mary and him; even more, he was afraid

of possible harm coming to Mary for what appeared to be immorality on her part (see John 8:2-11). Through this divinely wrought conception, Jesus truly became the One Mediator in whose Person is effected the reconciliation between God and human beings. He is both fully God and fully man.

**Verse 21:** *She will give birth to a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.”*

The angel’s pronouncement to Joseph about a son is reminiscent of Genesis 15:4, where God told Abram he would have a son long before the child was born. Jesus was “the Son of Abraham” by genealogical descent (Matt. 1:1). He was also the promised Son who would fulfill God’s promise to Abraham to be a blessing to all the peoples on earth (Gen. 12:3b).

The name to be given to Joseph’s son was Jesus. The reason for the name was because He will save His people from their sins. The name Jesus ultimately is derived from a Hebrew verb meaning “to save.”

**Verse 22:** *Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet:*

Matthew subsumed all these activities, human and Divine, under the category of fulfilled prophecy, a characteristic of his Gospel and Jesus’ ministry (see Matt. 5:17). In Matthew 1–2, Matthew quoted the Old Testament five times to demonstrate how Jesus’ birth fulfilled Old Testament prophecy (Matt. 1:22-23; 2:5-6,15,17-18,23).

Since only God could fulfill prophecy, Matthew’s declaration of the birth of Jesus to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet was equivalent to saying Jesus’ birth is God’s delivering on His promise. The Hebrews perceived God as One who spoke through His actions as well as through His words. Matthew quoted the prophet Isaiah but did not call specific attention to his name.

**Verse 23:** *See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name Him Immanuel, which is translated “God is with us.”*

Using the Septuagint, a Greek version of the Old Testament, Matthew quoted the well-known passage about the virgin who would become pregnant and who would give birth to a son. Initially, the prophecy was given to King Ahaz of Judah during a time of great

national crisis. The words were meant to be a comfort to the king and his people.

Mary was the virgin of the prophecy, who became pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and gave birth to a son named Jesus. The original prophecy was uttered around 734 B.C. and found ultimate fulfillment in the coming of Jesus into the world. The prophecy also contained the child’s symbolic name Immanuel [ih MAN yoo el], which means “God is with us.”

### 2. THE SUPREME COMMANDER (MATTHEW 2:1-6)

**Verse 1:** *After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived unexpectedly in Jerusalem,*

Matthew made clear the wise men’s arrival in Jerusalem occurred in the days of King Herod, who died in 4 B.C. The wise men or magi were men who interpreted the stars. They came from eastern countries, perhaps from Babylon or Persia. They played both political and religious roles in the land from which they came. That they arrived unexpectedly is borne out by the text in which Herod was clueless as to the significance of their arrival. These wise men were numbered to three because of the number of gifts they brought (Matt. 2:11), and they were later identified as Melchior, Balthasar, and Gaspar.

These wise men went to the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the city of the king, the place of the palace, and thus for visitors from eastern lands the logical stop for finding a newborn king. Additionally, travelers from the eastern regions followed the Euphrates River to the crest of the Fertile Crescent and then turned south to enter Judea from the north. From this direction, the small village of Bethlehem would have remained hidden behind the magnificence of Jerusalem.

**Verse 2:** *saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.”*

The wise men sought the one who was born King of the Jews. Matthew doesn’t record how the wise men knew the Child would become the King of the Jews, only that they referred to Him this way. Ironically, the title given to Jesus by these wise men after His birth would hang over His head on the cross at His death (Matt. 27:37).

Matthew was clear as to how and why the wise men came. They saw His star in the east. Much speculation

has gone into attempting to figure whether a particular alignment of the planets or perhaps a comet was the special star. The wise men indicated they had come to worship Him. The term translated worship means “to bow down” and “to show obeisance to” someone. That foreign dignitaries would want to show such deference to a Child is remarkable and significant.

**Verse 3:** *When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.*

When King Herod heard about the intent of foreign dignitaries to worship a recently born King in his country, he was extremely upset. Herod’s anxiety spilled over to his subjects so all Jerusalem was upset along with him. This scene may call to mind the historical event that provided the original setting for the Immanuel prophecy of Isaiah mentioned earlier in this lesson (see comments on Matt. 1:23). During the crisis of 734 B.C., the hearts of King Ahaz and his people “trembled like trees of a forest shaking in a wind” (Isa. 7:2).

Interestingly, both King Ahaz and King Herod were ungodly rulers in spite of whom God worked His salvation plan. Herod was known to be increasingly paranoid. He had numerous family members and close associates put to death to quell his suspicions. People would become deeply disturbed as a natural response to knowing such an emotionally unstable ruler had become agitated. They feared their king more than they feared the strangers from the east.

**Verse 4:** *So he assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people and asked them where the Messiah would be born.*

Herod responded to the news by assembling all the chief priests and scribes. Herod specifically asked where the Messiah would be born. The fact that he asked where indicates Herod believed the essentials of the wise men’s story that a king had been born in his territory. The star the wise men followed was no doubt visible to Herod as well. By following the star to Herod’s kingdom, the wise men directly tied the special star to an actual birth in Herod’s realm.

Herod had demonstrated time after time his inclination to kill anyone who threatened his reign. He sought to know where the young king was born in order to have him eliminated. Herod’s reference to the Messiah doesn’t mean he personally believed in the Jewish Messiah or

the prophecies about him. Rather, Herod suspected his people would affix messianic significance to such a Child, especially if foreign dignitaries attached the appearance of a special star to the birth of an important King in the region.

**Verse 5:** *“In Bethlehem of Judea,” they told him, “because this is what was written by the prophet:*

The chief priests and scribes readily answered Herod’s question. The Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem was located about 5 miles south of Jerusalem. The prophet Micah had prophesied the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. This location of the Messiah’s birth was one of two important pieces of information the scheming Herod needed. The other piece of information is referenced in Matthew 2:7.

**Verse 6:** *And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah: because out of you will come a leader who will shepherd My people Israel.”*

The chief priests and scribes quoted the appropriate passage from Micah (Mic. 5:2). Micah had expressed his prophecy directly to the tiny village: and you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah. Micah’s prophecy came through inspiration of the Holy Spirit and identified Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah, or the Anointed One. Bethlehem was David’s hometown; great David’s greater Son, would come from the same village.

Micah had emphasized the insignificance of Bethlehem by referring to the village as being “small among the clans of Judah” (Mic. 5:2). However, such an insignificant place would become extremely significant precisely because God chose to fulfill His promises to David.

### **3. EXTRAORDINARY ACTS (MATTHEW 2:7-11)**

**Verse 7:** *Then Herod secretly summoned the wise men and asked them the exact time the star appeared.*

The Greek term translated “secretly” occurs only twice in Matthew’s Gospel, once in reference to Joseph’s kind intentions to put Mary away quietly (1:19) and once in reference to Herod’s evil scheming in the present verse. This secrecy cast Herod in a suspicious light foreshadowing his evil intentions. Herod wanted to know the exact time the star appeared.

**Verse 8:** *He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you find Him, report*

*back to me so that I too can go and worship Him.”*

Matthew didn’t relay the response of the wise men to Herod’s command at this point. We discover their answer from his later command to kill the male children of Bethlehem two years of age and under (Matt. 2:16). Herod directed the wise men to Bethlehem. He instructed the wise men to search carefully for the child. He also requested they report back to him so he too could go and worship Him. Worship was used by the ruthless king as a ruse for murder.

**Verse 9:** *After hearing the king, they went on their way. And there it was—the star they had seen in the east! It led them until it came and stopped above the place where the child was.*

Once they left Herod, the wise men immediately saw the star. The phrase “there it was” renders the Greek term “behold,” used for emphasis. The fact that the star led them seems to indicate an astronomical phenomenon entirely different from stars or even comets as we think of them. The fact that the star appeared to move and then to stop over the specific place where the child was indicates an unusual and supernatural event.

**Verse 10:** *When they saw the star, they were overjoyed beyond measure.*

When they witnessed the star, they were overjoyed beyond measure. The combination of emphases on their sighting of the star and of their finding the Christ child contrasts starkly with the evil maneuvering of Herod’s palace.

**Verse 11:** *Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary His mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

The wise men entered the house, clearly a different structure than the feeding trough in which Jesus first had been placed (Luke 2:7). The shepherds of Luke’s Gospel found a Baby; the wise men in Matthew’s Gospel found a child. The change of location and of terminology confirms the wise men’s visit came subsequent to the visit of the shepherds. Three gifts are enumerated: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Inevitably, people assumed three wise men visited Jesus because three gifts are listed. The important point to remember is these wise men worshiped Jesus.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR DECEMBER 26 1 KINGS 11:1-13

### THE BACKGROUND

Solomon was the third king of Israel. He was preceded on the throne by Saul and David. Saul lost his right to reign by deliberately disobeying the Lord. David proved to be a faithful, though not perfect, king. David's desire to build God a house and to rule according to the Lord's precepts resulted in the divine promise to establish his monarchy. Part of God's sure mercies to David was the provision of an heir to sit on the throne after him. God blessed Solomon in response to the young king's request for "an obedient heart to judge" God's people (1 Kings 3:9). Solomon built the temple and prayed for God to respond to earnest, humble prayers.

### 1. THE FOUNDATION (1 KINGS 11:1-3)

**Verse 1:** *King Solomon loved many foreign women in addition to Pharaoh's daughter: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women*

The mention of Solomon's love for many women who were also foreigners sets the stage for his move away from the Lord. Five nations in particular are singled out. His Moabite [MOH uh bight], Ammonite [AM uh night], and Edomite [EE duhm ight] wives came from the nations located east and southeast of Israel. These nations tended to be perennial enemies of Israel. As for the Sidonian [sigh DOH nih uhn] and the Hittite [HIT tight] women, they came from the regions of modern-day Lebanon and Turkey respectively. Sidon was one of two important cities of Phoenicia along with Tyre, the city of King Hiram, who supplied Solomon with building materials for the temple. David had a faithful servant named Uriah the Hittite, who had been the husband of Bathsheba, Solomon's mother, before David married her.

**Verse 2:** *from the nations that the LORD had told the Israelites about, "Do not intermarry with them, and they must not intermarry with you, because they will turn you away from Me to their gods." Solomon was deeply attached to these women and loved them.*

The main point centers on Solomon's marriages to women from nations with whom the Lord had forbidden intermarriage. God prohibited the marriage of His people

with people who served other gods. The major reason for prohibiting such marriages was to prevent idolatry and the worship of false gods in Israel. According to Deuteronomy 7:4, such marriages would result in the foreign women turning the hearts of the sons of Israel away from the Lord and to the worship of other gods. The prohibition included a warning of divine judgment. The Lord's anger would burn against those who disobeyed Him, and He would swiftly destroy them.

Solomon was deeply attached to these women. In the original Hebrew language the phrase "to these" is placed at the front of the clause for emphasis. Thus the expression can very literally be translated: "To these Solomon clung for loving." Solomon's wives and concubines have been compared with his collection of gold that he used to enhance his status and power.

**Verse 3:** *He had 700 wives who were princesses and 300 concubines, and they turned his heart away from the LORD.*

Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. The 700 wives were princesses (daughters of neighboring kings). In Solomon's time, many kings were equivalent to the mayor of a city or the leader of a clan. Such tribal leaders would be far less motivated to align themselves against Solomon if doing so pitted them against their own daughters and grandchildren.

In addition to the expressed concern of the possibility of idolatry stemming from such marriages, the dimension of divine protection could also be in view. The Lord was the Protector of His people. To seek military alliances through political marriages demonstrated a lack of trust in the Lord's protection.

### 2. THE DOMINO EFFECT (1 KINGS 11:4-8)

**Verse 4:** *When Solomon was old, his wives seduced him to follow other gods. His heart was not completely with the LORD his God, as his father David's heart had been.*

Solomon's marriages to so many women from other religious cultures when he was younger ultimately caught up with him in his advanced years. His wives seduced him, literally they "caused his heart to turn." Though he began by loving the Lord (1 Kings 3:3), Solomon reached a point in his life when he listened to his wives instead of to the Lord. The statement "his heart was not completely with the LORD his God" implies Solomon didn't abandon the Lord entirely. Rather, his full-hearted devotion to the

Lord, characteristic of his earlier years, had waned and his first desire was to please his wives by worshiping their gods.

Solomon is compared in an unfavorable way with David his father. David's heart is described as having been completely with the Lord.

**Verse 5:** *Solomon followed Ashtoreth, the goddess of the Sidonians, and Milcom, the detestable idol of the Ammonites.*

The charge that Solomon followed Ashtoreth [ASH tuh reth] literally means he "went after" the Sidonian goddess. He pursued the path of knowing and venerating this goddess of fertility, love, and war. Interestingly, the Hebrews took the original name of this goddess, 'Ashteret, and substituted the vowels from their word for shame, boshet, thus bringing shame upon the memory of this goddess. The goddess many Israelites chose to dishonor, Solomon decided to honor. He also chose to follow Milcom [MIL kahm], the detestable idol of the Ammonites.

**Verse 6:** *Solomon did what was evil in the LORD's sight, and unlike his father David, he did not completely follow the LORD.*

Because of his idolatry, Solomon received the same summary judgment as the vast majority of the kings of Israel and Judah who would reign after him. He "did what was evil in the LORD's sight." We read again that "he did not completely follow the LORD" in contrast to his father David. Solomon who started out so well and who had the reputation for being Israel's wisest king, in the end, turned out to be one of its most foolish leaders by forsaking the Lord to go after other gods.

**Verse 7:** *At that time, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh, the detestable idol of Moab, and for Milcom, the detestable idol of the Ammonites on the hill across from Jerusalem.*

Solomon's idolatry took the form of building a high place for various gods. A high place, as the name implies, was an elevated shrine dedicated to a god and typically built on top of a hill. People in ancient times believed altitude was important in the worship of the gods. Solomon selected the hill across from Jerusalem. Several hills could fit the description, but the most likely is the Mount of Olives. Whichever hill was in view, Solomon built high places for Chemosh [KEE mahsh] and for Milcom, or Molech, both astral deities. The presence of so many shrines to so many gods detracted from the

central importance of the temple as the place where the Lord chose for His name to dwell. Religious pluralism was a major problem in Solomon's time as it is in our own time.

**Verse 8:** *He did the same for all his foreign wives, who were burning incense and offering sacrifices to their gods.*

The statement "he did the same for all his foreign wives" indicates the vast scope of Solomon's idolatry. To accommodate the worship of the false gods of so many wives meant Solomon had little time to worship the Lord and less time to lead God's people. By burning incense and offering sacrifices to their gods, Solomon was displaying his misdirected commitment to his foreign wives and their idols. Ironically, Solomon worshiped the gods of people he conquered while most people in ancient times would serve the gods of their conquerors. These open displays of reverence to false gods must have caused true devotees of the Lord to tremble.

### 3. THE AFTERSHOCK (1 KINGS 11:9-13)

**Verse 9:** *The LORD was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the LORD God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice.*

The LORD was angry with Solomon. Human actions affect God. The Lord had appeared to the king twice, once in a dream at Gibeon (3:5) and again in response to his dedicatory prayer for the temple (9:2). These direct appearances of God were meant to reinforce Solomon's faith in a God who desired to bless the king and his people. Therefore, the Lord's anger was justifiable in that Solomon sinned and his sin had negative consequences for the people of Israel. Since Solomon's "heart had turned away from the LORD God of Israel," the king was no longer in a position to provide godly leadership to the people of God.

**Verse 10:** *He had commanded him about this, so that he would not follow other gods, but Solomon did not do what the LORD had commanded.*

Solomon ignored the commandments and warnings God had given him about the sin of idolatry. The reason for God's previous commands was so he wouldn't follow other gods. The phrase "other gods" appears in the Bible in the first of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:3). Foundational to the covenant between God and Israel was the belief in the Lord's supremacy over the idols

of all other nations. Israel's God was "the God of gods and Lord of lords" (Deut. 10:17). This God appeared to Solomon twice, gave him specific commands against idolatry, and blessed him with unsurpassed wisdom and wealth. In return, Solomon allowed the influence of his foreign wives to turn his heart away from the God who had blessed him. Thus Solomon did not do what the LORD had commanded.

**Verse 11:** *Then the LORD said to Solomon, "Since you have done this and did not keep My covenant and My statutes, which I commanded you, I will tear the kingdom away from you and give it to your servant.*

This verse teaches several truths about divine judgment. First, God always judges sin. Sometimes He judges sin immediately; at other times He delays His judgment, but He always judges sin. Second, God's judgments are always responses to human sin. God doesn't judge people unpredictably or on a whim. Third, God's judgment is related to the specific sins committed. In Solomon's case, judgment took the form of the Lord's vow to tear the kingdom away from him and to give it to his servant. That this drastic measure was in response to Solomon's sin is indicated in the words "since you have done this and did not keep My covenant and My statutes." David had encouraged Solomon to keep his obligations to the Lord (1 Kings 2:1-4), but Solomon refused to listen. Finally, no one is above God's law. Even the king was held accountable for his disobedience.

**Verse 12:** *However, I will not do it during your lifetime because of your father David; I will tear it out of your son's hand.*

God chose not to divide the Kingdom of Israel in Solomon's lifetime. Because of David's loyalty to the Lord, God decided to allow Solomon to preside over the United Kingdom of Israel for the remainder of his days. God did inform Solomon the kingdom would be torn out of his son's hand. This judgment demonstrates the spiritual truth that the sins of the fathers are visited upon and affect future generations (Ex. 20:5).

**Verse 13:** *Yet, I will not tear the entire kingdom away from him. I will give one tribe to your son because of My servant David and because of Jerusalem that I chose."*

God's promise to give one tribe to Solomon's son referred to Rehoboam, who became king over Judah after the northern tribes split off. The Lord informed

Solomon He wouldn't tear the entire kingdom away from Rehoboam. Two reasons are given for leaving one tribe to Rehoboam. First, God acted because of His servant David. In 2 Samuel 7:16, the Lord had promised David to establish his dynasty. The second reason was because of Jerusalem that the Lord chose. In spite of Solomon's idolatrous practices in Jerusalem, the Lord had an overarching plan for Jerusalem and for His people. Even though Solomon's idolatry was treacherous and had to be judged, neither his sins nor the sins of others could thwart God's plan for His people as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:6).

The Lord's covenant wasn't just about the king and his ongoing dynasty, but also about the nation's role as God's people. Solomon's spiritual compromise had far-reaching consequences. The Lord declared that in the future He would tear apart Solomon's kingdom because of the king's disobedience.