

Be Strong, and Show Yourself a Man

1 Kings 2

One of my favorite philosophers is the famous New York Yankees catcher, Yogi Berra. Who could argue with the wisdom packed into these famous Berra quotes: “It ain’t over til it’s over”; “You can observe a lot by watching”; or my personal favorite: “The future ain’t what it used to be”? Berra has also been quoted as saying, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” Well, 1 Kings 2 brings us to a fork in the road. When we read the story of David’s final instructions to Solomon and Solomon’s first acts as king, we are confronted with a pressing question, and we must choose to interpret this story in one direction or the other. Here’s the dilemma: is this story about honoring God, or is it about personal vengeance and dirty politics? Commentators tend to be divided on that question, and I believe it is a crucial question because the way we answer it will largely determine how we see this text speaking into our lives.

The first eleven chapters of 1 Kings are all about the reign of Solomon, which was the high point of the kingdom of Israel. It is clear that the author wants to give us both the good and the bad when it comes to evaluating Solomon’s reign as a whole. But when it comes to chapter 2 in itself, is Solomon being presented here positively or negatively? Let that question drive us to look to the text closely and in light of other Scripture passages in order to find an answer. I believe in the Protestant teaching that Scripture is its own interpreter, and so we stand on firm ground when we listen in one text for echoes of other texts. And then, once we have answered that question, a second question proceeds naturally from the first: What does this text have to do with us? How can it speak into our lives?

Let’s begin with the first question: Does this chapter present Solomon positively or negatively? I’ll go ahead and lay my cards out on the table: I believe it presents him positively, and I hope to convince you of that as we walk through the story together. First, I would note that there is a similar refrain at two key junctures in this chapter. Verse 12 reads, “So Solomon sat on the throne of David his father, and his kingdom was firmly established.” Now look at verse 46b: “So the kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon.” This is the story of a kingdom established, or secured, after the transition from David to Solomon. The repeated statement in verses 12 and 46 naturally divides the text into two sections, so let’s look at each one in turn while I make the case that the author wants us to see Solomon in a positive light here:

First, we have

1. David’s final charge to Solomon (vv. 1-12)

King David knows his death is imminent, so he gives final instructions to his son Solomon. The main command he leaves with Solomon is in verse 2: “Be strong, and show yourself a man.” What does it mean to show yourself a man? The wording here is similar to what Moses said to Joshua at another time of transition in leadership. In Deuteronomy 31:7-8 we read, “Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, ‘Be strong and courageous, for you shall go with this people into the land that the Lord has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall put them in possession of it. It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.’” Moses’ charge “Be strong and courageous” is now David’s charge “Be strong, and show yourself a man.” It is the same charge, just with different words. It upholds a vision of manhood that is defined by the

courage to do what is right even in the face of threats. Solomon is charged here to be a king of courageous, decisive leadership. He is presented as a new Joshua taking command of Israel.

So then, how is Solomon to be strong and show himself a man? David gives him two particular words of instruction. First, David says in verses 3-4, rule by the Law of Moses. Verse 3 begins, “and keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his rules, and his testimonies, as it is written in the Law of Moses.” Then David outlines two results that will come from Solomon’s faithfulness to the Law. Picking up in verse 3: “[first], that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn, [and second], that the LORD may establish his word that he spoke concerning me, saying, ‘If your sons pay close attention to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, you shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel.’” So the two results of Solomon’s obedience will be the prospering of his kingdom under the Lord’s blessing and the continuation of the house of David on the throne without interruption.

Then David gives Solomon a second word of direction by which he will be strong and show himself a man: he tells Solomon to deal justly with enemies and friends in verses 5-10. In verses 5-6 David tells Solomon to deal with Joab, the commander of David’s army. Joab had committed two acts of murder against Abner and against Amasa, both of whom represented threats to Joab’s command of the army at two different times. Although David was angered by Joab’s actions, he never brought justice against Joab, likely because he knew of Joab’s strong position in the kingdom, and he never found a clear opportunity to deal with him without threatening his own rule. So David punted on that issue, but here he tells Solomon to deal with it, trusting that Solomon will have the wisdom to know when and how to handle it.

Then in verse 7 David tells Solomon to deal kindly with the sons of Barzillai. Barzillai was an eighty-year-old man at the time of Absalom’s rebellion, so we can assume he was dead by this point, but David charges Solomon to reward Barzillai’s sons with kindness because Barzillai met David and his entourage with plentiful food and supplies when David fled from Absalom. Barzillai gave David a table in the wilderness, so it is only fitting that Barzillai’s sons should have a place at the table in Solomon’s kingdom.

Then finally, in verses 8-9, David tells Solomon to deal with Shimei, the Benjaminite who cursed David when he fled from Absalom. On his return trip to Jerusalem, David swore to Shimei that he would not put him to death for his curses, and David kept that oath. But Solomon is not bound by the same oath, and David believes it is important for Shimei to be dealt with decisively. So again, he tells Solomon to use his wisdom to bring justice to Shimei.

Do you find it jarring that, right after David tells Solomon to keep the Law of Moses, he gives him instructions about killing his enemies? Is this just a matter of fleshly vengeance from a bitter old man? Is it just dirty politics winning out over godliness? No, I don’t think the text presents it that way. I believe the author is presenting David here as charging Solomon to do what is both just and wise in order to protect his kingdom. You have to understand that in the ancient world, they didn’t have an inauguration day every four years to witness the peaceful transition of power. Times of transition between kings were particularly fragile times. If you go on to read the rest of 1-2 Kings, you will see that once the northern kingdom of Israel begins after the time of

Solomon, it will be ruled by nine different houses before it is all over. King Shallum will reign for a mere month before his assassination, and one of his predecessors, King Zimri, reigns for a mere seven days before he is taken out! Kingdoms in transition are fragile, and they must be protected. Joab has already aligned himself with Adonijah, King Solomon's older brother and a rival to the throne. And it's worth noting that when David returned to Jerusalem after the rebellion of Absalom, Shimei came begging for his life, but he also had a thousand men of the tribe of Benjamin with him, according to 2 Samuel 19:17. Only a man of prominence, who has the ability to rally support and do great damage to Solomon's kingdom, would be able to come before David with a thousand men. So David recognizes that there are serious threats to Solomon's kingdom, and they must be addressed if this dynasty is going to last. So he charges him to be strong and show himself a man by keeping the Law of Moses and dealing justly with enemies and friends. After that, David breathes his last and is buried in Jerusalem.

Verses 11-12 conclude the first section with a summary of David's reign and the statement that the kingdom of Solomon "was firmly established." That simply means that, when Solomon ascended to the throne, there was no public opposition to him. David had taken care of that issue in chapter 1. But that doesn't mean all is well. There are no public threats to Solomon at this time, but there are things stirring below the surface, as we shall see.

So now that David is off the scene, will Solomon heed his father's charge? Will he be strong and show himself a man? The rest of the chapter shows, at least initially, the answer to that question, as it shows us

2. Solomon's decisive triumph over his enemies (vv. 13-46)

Right out of the gate, Solomon deals firmly and decisively with four of his enemies: Adonijah, Abiathar, Joab, and Shimei. First is the account of Adonijah, Solomon's older brother and former claimant to the throne of Israel, in verses 13-25. In a peculiar turn of events, Adonijah, who has already acknowledged Solomon's rightful rule (1:53) approaches Bathsheba, Solomon's mother. First he assures her that he comes peacefully, and then he asks her for a favor in verses 15-17: "He said, 'You know that the kingdom was mine, and that all Israel fully expected me to reign. However, the kingdom has turned about and became my brother's, for it was his from the Lord. And now I have one request to make of you; do not refuse me.' She said to him, 'Speak.' And he said, 'Please ask King Solomon—he will not refuse you—to give me Abishag the Shunammite as my wife.'" Remember who Abishag is: the beautiful young woman who tended to King David in his old age. Is Adonijah asking for her as a wife as a consolation prize since he didn't get the throne as he first planned? No, that's not what is going on here. When you hear this request, you should hear the echoes of an earlier story: that of David's son Absalom coming into Jerusalem and lying with David's concubines who had stayed behind in the city. That was Absalom's decisive way of asserting himself as king against his father. Now Absalom 2.0 (Adonijah) is asking for Abishag, who had been a kind of wife to David (though he was never sexually intimate with her) to become his wife. This is a power play, meant to rally support around Adonijah so that he can take the throne from Solomon.

Now, why would he approach Bathsheba with this request? Maybe he thinks Bathsheba will have a kind of motherly pity for him. That's possible, but I think he is playing on her jealousy. If you look back at 1:15, you see that Bathsheba, David's wife, had gone into his chamber to make a request of him while young, beautiful Abishag was tending to him. That had to be an awkward

moment, seeing this young woman caring for her husband. And maybe Bathsheba knew that David had never been intimate with Abishag, so it was in Bathsheba's interest to conclude that she never actually qualified as a wife or concubine. So yes, let Adonijah have her! That's an easy way to get her out of sight and out of mind. Bathsheba agreed to make this request of Solomon, and Adonijah was betting that Solomon's affection for his mother would cloud his judgment, thus allowing Adonijah's plan to come to fruition.

So Bathsheba approached King Solomon, and his affection for her is clear from the story. He bowed down to her, had a seat brought in for her, and promised her he would not refuse her request. But then he actually heard the request, and he saw right through it. "Give Abishag to Adonijah? You might as well give him the kingdom itself, because he already has Abiathar the priest and Joab the commander on his side. This move will only strengthen him." So note what Solomon says in verse 24: "Now therefore as the Lord lives, who has *established* me and placed me on the throne of David my father, and who has made me a house, as he promised, Adonijah shall be put to death today." There's that key word "established" again, which has already appeared in verse 12 and will appear again in verse 46. To secure his kingdom, Solomon orders his right-hand man Benaiah to execute Adonijah for this act of treachery.

When Adam was in the garden, charged to protect his domain in the name of the Lord, he was led astray by the influence of a woman. Here is Solomon, hearing a request from a woman for whom he has great affection, but he does not allow it to sway him. Where Adam failed to protect his domain, Solomon has the wisdom to act decisively to guard what has been entrusted to him. Solomon shows himself a man by not being swayed by his mother's unwise request. One enemy has been dealt with.

The next enemy on the list is Abiathar the priest. Note verses 26-27: "And to Abiathar the priest the king said, 'Go to Anathoth, to your estate, for you deserve death. But I will not at this time put you to death, because you carried the ark of the Lord God before David my father, and because you shared in all my father's affliction.' So Solomon expelled Abiathar from being priest to the Lord, thus fulfilling the word of the Lord that he had spoken concerning the house of Eli in Shiloh." Abiathar's office and past loyalty to David win him the mercy of being spared from death. But Solomon expels him from Jerusalem and thus from the priesthood, fulfilling the prophecy of 1 Samuel 2:27-36 against the house of Eli (Abiathar was a descendant of Eli). Solomon did not allow Abiathar's office to deter him from doing what had to be done. Once again, he showed himself a man. That's two enemies dealt with.

The next enemy on the list is Joab (vv. 28-35), who knows his time is coming. Verse 28 reads, "When the news came to Joab—for Joab had supported Adonijah although he had not supported Absalom—Joab fled to the tent of the Lord and caught hold of the horns of the altar." Just as Adonijah had done in chapter 1, Joab seeks refuge at the altar, putting his hope in the custom that human blood should not be shed in the holy place. So let's see how Solomon responds to Joab's action in verses 29-34: "And when it was told King Solomon, 'Joab has fled to the tent of the Lord, and behold, he is beside the altar,' Solomon sent Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, saying, 'Go, strike him down.' So Benaiah came to the tent of the Lord and said to him, 'The king commands, "Come out."' But he said, 'No, I will die here.' Then Benaiah brought the king word again, saying, 'Thus said Joab, and thus he answered me.' The king replied to him, 'Do as he has

said, strike him down and bury him, and thus take away from me and from my father's house the guilt for the blood that Joab shed without cause. The Lord will bring back his bloody deeds on his own head, because, without the knowledge of my father David, he attacked and killed with the sword two men more righteous and better than himself, Abner the son of Ner, commander of the army of Israel, and Amasa the son of Jether, commander of the army of Judah. So shall their blood come back on the head of Joab and on the head of his descendants forever. But for David and for his descendants and for his house and for his throne there shall be peace from the Lord forevermore.' Then Benaiah the son of Jehoiada went up and struck him down and put him to death. And he was buried in his own house in the wilderness." David had never been able to handle Joab, but Solomon seized the moment when Joab was weakened by Adonijah's fall to put him to death for justice that was long overdue. And Solomon was undeterred by the custom surrounding the altar. Once again, he showed himself a man by doing what had to be done.

So with the high priest Abiathar gone and the commander of the army now dead, Solomon puts a new administration in place, according to verse 35: "The king put Benaiah the son of Jehoiada over the army in place of Joab, and the king put Zadok the priest in the place of Abiathar." Three enemies have been dealt with.

That last enemy on the list is Shimei (vv. 36-46), the Benjaminite who had cursed David during Absalom's rebellion. Solomon does not immediately kill him. He has no justification to do so. But he does have justification to contain him, because Shimei is a man who could rally a threat to Solomon's rule at any time. So we read in verses 36-38: "Then the king sent and summoned Shimei and said to him, 'Build yourself a house in Jerusalem and dwell there, and do not go out from there to any place whatever. For on the day you go out and cross the brook Kidron, know for certain that you shall die. Your blood shall be on your own head.' And Shimei said to the king, 'What you say is good; as my lord the king has said, so will your servant do.' So Shimei lived in Jerusalem many days." In Jerusalem, Solomon could keep an eye on him. Shimei agreed to this arrangement, and all was well for a time.

But then Shimei got careless. Look at verses 39-40: "But it happened at the end of three years that two of Shimei's servants ran away to Achish, son of Maacah, king of Gath. And when it was told Shimei, 'Behold, your servants are in Gath,' Shimei arose and saddled a donkey and went to Gath to Achish to seek his servants. Shimei went and brought his servants from Gath." Is this short trip to Gath really a big deal? Yes, it is! Note Solomon's response in verses 41-43: "And when Solomon was told that Shimei had gone from Jerusalem to Gath and returned, the king sent and summoned Shimei and said to him, 'Did I not make you swear by the Lord and solemnly warn you, saying, "Know for certain that on the day you go out and go to any place whatever, you shall die"? And you said to me, "What you say is good; I will obey." Why then have you not kept your oath to the Lord and the commandment with which I commanded you?'" Shimei had broken his oath by taking it lightly. And if Solomon winked at this one little trip, what would prevent Shimei from doing it again and again, effectively nullifying Solomon's plan to contain him? So Solomon gives his verdict in verses 44-46: "The king also said to Shimei, 'You know in your own heart all the harm that you did to David my father. So the Lord will bring back your harm on your own head. But King Solomon shall be blessed, and the throne of David shall be *established* before the Lord forever.' Then the king commanded Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, and he went out and struck him down, and he died." The curses Shimei pronounced over David

have now come down on his own head. Note in particular that Solomon used that key word “establish” in verse 45. Then the author concludes verse 46 by saying, “So the kingdom was *established* in the hand of Solomon.” By telling the story this way, recording Solomon’s words and then showing his words fulfilled, I think the author is telling us that God endorses what Solomon has done here. He has, once again, shown himself a man.

So, does this text present Solomon positively or negatively? I believe it is a positive portrayal of Solomon acting wisely and justly against his enemies. He is strong and shows himself a man. He is a new Joshua at a time of leadership transition, making war against his own brand of “Canaanites.” He is a new Adam who is not swayed by the foolish request of a woman he holds dear, but he defends his domain from the influence of serpents. With wisdom and decisive leadership, Solomon secures the kingdom at a fragile time and triumphs over his enemies. I hope you are persuaded that I have read this text correctly, because now we are ready to ask the pressing question for us: What does this story have to do with our lives? How does it apply? I want to draw from it one word of exhortation: **Let us take courage by looking to Jesus our reigning King, who will come again in triumph over his enemies.**

David charged his son Solomon to be strong and show himself a man. The closest parallel we see to that in the New Testament is 1 Corinthians 16:13-14, where Paul writes to the church at Corinth: “Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.” Why would Paul say, “Act like men” to a church that includes women? It is because courage and boldness are traditionally associated with masculinity, and the church as a whole is to exhibit this characteristic. The church is, in some ways, collectively feminine. We are the bride of Christ, and thus we receive and affirm his headship over us. But we also reign with him as kings, and thus in some ways must exhibit a collective masculinity.

The opposite of masculine virtue is not feminine virtue. Both are virtues, and thus both are good, true, and beautiful. The opposite of masculine virtue is the vice of effeminacy, which is a weakness, softness, an ability to be swayed and steered both others. Masculine virtue takes a stand with truth. Effeminate vice is led around by emotions, either of oneself or by the expressed emotions of others. If Solomon had listened to his mother’s request instead of taking decisive action to protect his kingdom, he would have succumbed to effeminacy. But he didn’t. He showed himself a man.

Effeminacy is a vice that has great appeal in our day, because we live in a culture that values emotions over reason and thus says the worst possible offense one can commit is hurting someone else’s feelings. If a church hurts someone’s feelings, it may be charged with spiritual abuse. Consequently, there is a strong temptation for churches to be soft when it comes to proclaiming the whole counsel of God, guarding themselves from false teachings, and dealing with sin in their midst. It’s easier to soft-pedal or ignore offensive topics and leave sin issues unaddressed. Once I was teaching on the topic of church discipline at another church where I served as a pastor. Clearly, it was a new idea to my congregation. One of the members said, “If we practice church discipline, everybody will think we’re a cult.” And my response was, “Let them think that. We must obey Christ.” If we are more concerned about what people think of us than of obeying Christ, we have succumbed to effeminacy.

If we are going to obey Paul's command to act like men, we must proclaim the whole counsel of God. That means we must let Scripture tell us what our teaching will be. We must not allow worldly ideas to creep in and corrupt our teachings but must stay on guard against them. We must not allow the noble desire to preserve relationships lead us to compromise on matters of truth. We must not soft-pedal sin but must guard the holiness of the church by engaging in the practice of redemptive church discipline. In all these ways and more, we will act like men. But it seems fitting that Paul would immediately follow that with the command, "Let all that you do be done in love." Acting like men emphatically does not mean acting in an unloving way. It doesn't mean you become an arrogant jerk who holds others in contempt. The virtue of masculine courage is strong and humble, not chest-thumping but self-giving.

Now, how does 1 Kings 2 help strengthen our courage? Not merely by Solomon's bold example, but preeminently by pointing us beyond Solomon to Christ. Solomon's reign is a type of Christ's triumphant reign over his enemies. The most quoted Old Testament verse in the New Testament is Psalm 110:1: "The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" Repeatedly in the New Testament, we see this verse applied to the risen and exalted Christ. There are two important truths to grasp in the way the New Testament applies Psalm 110:1 to Christ. One truth is that Christ is reigning now, and thus he is triumphing over his enemies now. Some theologians have argued that Jesus offered the kingdom to Israel, but since they refused, the kingdom has now been postponed until his second coming. And thus, Christ's reign has not yet begun. That claim is completely at odds with the New Testament. Jesus didn't *offer* the kingdom to Israel. He *announced* it. He said, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand. It is upon you, whether you like it or not. So repent if you want to enter it." Our message to the world is not, therefore, "Would you give Jesus a chance?" It is rather, "Jesus Christ is Lord, crucified and risen for the salvation of sinners. So repent and believe in him." King Jesus has bound the strong man, Satan, and is now plundering his goods by calling to himself a people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. The most important political events in the world do not take place in the White House, the halls of Congress, or in the Pentagon. They happen in local churches with the simple acts of preaching the Word, baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

But there is another important truth to grasp from Psalm 110:1. Listen to it again: "Sit at my right hand, *until* I make your enemies your footstool." There is a culmination point to the subjugation of Christ's enemies. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:26 that the last enemy to be destroyed is death, which ties Christ's final triumph over his enemies to the day of his return, when the dead are raised. At that time there will be a final judgment, with the righteous permanently separated from the wicked forever. In Titus 2:13 Paul speaks of that coming day as our "blessed hope." Unlike Solomon, who held a unique position in a theocratic kingdom, we have not been given the sword to wield against our enemies. Jesus will wield the sword against them. We are called to love them and even to die at their hands if that is the cost of proclaiming the gospel.

If we are going to obey the command to "act like men," we will often find ourselves at odds with an effeminate world. We will offend people, we will invite slander against ourselves, and possibly at some point, even active persecution. So where does our confidence to stand firm come from? It doesn't come from ourselves. We are not that impressive. It comes from the firm assurance that Jesus Christ has been enthroned as King, that he reigns even now, and that one day he will come again to set all wrongs right. Faith is the ability to see that as true, even though

it remains hidden from our eyes. Because if it is true, then nothing else ultimately matters. So by faith in the risen, reigning, returning Christ, let us be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, and be strong. Amen.