

## Promises Kept

1 Kings 4

Sometime around the 2000's and the 2010's, there arose a whole cottage industry of books written about people going to Heaven and then coming back to tell us about it. One such book, written by Todd Burpo, tells the story of his four-year-old son Colton's claimed experience of Heaven while he was undergoing surgery. It is entitled *Heaven is For Real*. I never read the book, nor have I read any of the other books that make similar claims, and there are two main reasons for that. One is that when the apostle Paul himself tells about his experience of being taken up to Heaven in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, he says that he "heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter." If that was Paul's experience, it makes me automatically skeptical of anyone claiming otherwise. But a second reason I never picked up one of those books is because I don't need to hear any stories about out-of-body experiences to make me believe that Heaven is for real. I know it is real, because God has told me in his Word that it is. Believing in the reality of Heaven is not merely believing that there is another realm out there beyond us. It is believing in a goal, a purpose that God had from the beginning in creating us, namely, to dwell with him in his presence forever, seeing his face and being filled with endless, ever-increasing joy. That is Heaven.

God has promised that glorious future to all who are reconciled to him through his Son Jesus Christ. That promise of Heaven is a promise that anchors us in the face of everything that causes us pain, turmoil, and difficulty in this present age. But if it doesn't seem real to us, it won't be a life-anchoring hope. We will be like a ship tossed around by every wind and wave that unsettles us. If Heaven seems more mythological than real, if it's all just "pie-in-the-sky" wishful thinking that distracts us from the real world, then we will not make it through this world with our faith intact. So how do we gain a deepened assurance that Heaven is indeed for real? Not by reading those books. We look to the promises of God. But how do we know that God's promises about our future can be trusted? We look to the promises he has already fulfilled in the past. Remembering God's past faithfulness is fuel for present faith that looks to the future.

That is what I think the value of 1 Kings 4 is for our lives. You may have noticed that there is no story in chapter 4. We have seen the story of Solomon's rise to power, the defense of his kingdom, and his prayer for wisdom to rule well in chapters 1-3. Now in chapter 4 the story pauses to give us a summary account of what life in Solomon's kingdom was like. And it was glorious. Under King Solomon, Israel reached its pinnacle of prosperity, security, and dominion. And written across this summary account is the phrase "promises kept." God, who made extraordinary promises to Abraham concerning a great nation that would come from him, has now fulfilled those promises through the events of the exodus, the conquest, the raising up of David, and now blessing David's son Solomon as the most prosperous king of the Old Testament era. If God kept his promises regarding the earthly kingdom of Israel, we can trust him to keep his promises regarding the heavenly kingdom of his Son. And we can anchor our lives accordingly, because Heaven is, indeed, for real.

So my goal today is to lead us in the task of remembering, as Lee called us to last week. Let us remember what God did in the past to fulfill his promises, and let us look with assurance to the glorious future he has promised us. This chapter divides naturally into two main sections, which

we will walk through in turn, and together they will give us a full picture of how God's promises were kept. We begin with

### **1. Solomon's administrative wisdom (vv. 1-19)**

In the Bible, wisdom is the skill of living well. That applies not only to living in a morally upright way or to rightly administering justice, as Solomon did in the account of the two prostitutes in 3:16-28. It also applies to practical matters, such as organizing the logistics of a kingdom.

Solomon had administrative wisdom that enabled the efficient functioning of his administration. In verses 1-6 we see a list of the names of his cabinet, the highest officials and closest advisors who assisted him in the task of governing the kingdom of Israel. There is a similar list given for David his father in 2 Samuel 8:15-18. Every king needs key people in key positions, and judging by the prosperity of Israel at this time, we can deduce that Solomon put a very effective team in place.

But verses 7-19 tell of a new development in Israel under Solomon, which is the creation of twelve districts in Israel, each one overseen by a capable administrator, and each one given the responsibility of securing provisions for Solomon's massive administration for one month a year. And according to verse 27, the administrators of these districts did their jobs well: "And those officers supplied provisions of King Solomon, and for all who came to King Solomon's table, each one in his month. They let nothing be lacking." Think of these as districts organized for the purpose of taxation to support the central government. With his administrative wisdom, Solomon aligned the whole nation to the task of making sure his administration lacked nothing.

When I read this account in verses 7-19, I am reminded of the story of Moses' father-in-law Jethro, who in Exodus 18 advised Moses to organize a chain of command among the people of Israel so that other men could be engaged in handling disputes among the people and applying God's law to their inquiries. Prior to that, Moses tried to handle everything himself, and he was simply overwhelmed by the demands. But by placing some men over tens, some over fifties, and some over hundreds, Moses removed himself from the lower-level disputes and only took on the hardest cases. With that act of administrative wisdom, he made his leadership of Israel through the time of the wilderness a task that he could bear. We don't often think about how important administrative wisdom is. I don't recall any of my Sunday School teachers growing up saying, "Okay, children, for today's lesson we are going to talk about administrative efficiency." But Paul lists administration as a spiritual gift in 1 Cor. 12:28. Administrators set things in order by aligning the diverse efforts of people toward one, united goal. We need gifted administrators in the church, for their wisdom is a blessing to us all. Administrators enable the diverse gifts of our body to become fruitful as they are coordinated together.

King Solomon, exercising the wisdom God gave him, organized his kingdom in a way that made it run like a well-oiled machine. In doing so, did he risk overreaching his power? Yes, I believe he did, and as we will see in future chapters, that will become an issue later. But at this point, it seems that all is right with the world as Solomon organizes the kingdom with his administrative wisdom.

In the next section, the author shows us the result of the king's wise rule:

## **2. Solomon's blessed kingdom (vv. 20-34).**

In order to hear what the author is telling us with the description of Solomon's kingdom in these verses, I first want to refer back to some earlier passages of Scripture. Key among these passages is Genesis 12:1-3: "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'" I see three key elements to this initial promise to Abraham: land, descendants, and blessing.

Those promises to Abraham were expanded on in other passages, especially Genesis 15, 17, and 22. Let's consider the land promise. In Genesis 15:18, the Lord formalized a covenant with Abraham by saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates." Now, to be clear, the territory there defined is much larger than what we would normally think of as the land of Canaan that Israel inherited. The Euphrates River was far to the northeast, and the river of Egypt was far to the southwest, encompassing an area quite a bit larger than Israel proper. And yet the author of 1 Kings tells us that Solomon did, in fact, rule over that entire territory. Note verse 21: "Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt. They brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life." And then note verse 24: "For he had dominion over all the region west of the Euphrates from Tiphshah to Gaza, over all the kings west of the Euphrates." Solomon inherited, not just a kingdom, but a small empire that his father David had conquered (2 Samuel 8). By describing the far reach of Solomon's rule, the author is telling us, "Do you remember God's promise of land to Abraham? Promise kept."

Now, consider the descendants promise. After the event in which Abraham showed his trust in God by his willingness to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice, the Lord said to him in Genesis 22:17, "I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore." The author of 1 Kings deliberately echoes that promise in verse 20: "Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea." By describing the vast number of Abraham's physical descendants in the nation of Israel, the author is telling us, "Do you remember God's promise of descendants to Abraham? Promise kept."

What about the promise of blessing? We see manifold blessings on Solomon's kingdom described here. Note the lavish provision for Solomon's household described in verses 22-23: "Solomon's provision for one day was thirty cors of fine flour and sixty cors of meal [a "cor" was roughly 275 pounds], ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle, a hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fattened fowl." Then note verse 26: "Solomon also had 40,000 stalls of horses for his chariots, and 12,000 horsemen." Now, the fact that Solomon's household has immense wealth and enjoys a rich diet doesn't necessarily mean the whole nation is blessed. Is this a situation similar to what you find in communist countries, where elite members of the party enjoy wealth by exploiting the starving masses? No, it's not that at all. One reason it is not that way, as verses 21 and 24 tell us, is that Solomon's provision was at least in part supplied by tribute he received from other nations over which he had dominion. As for the life of the everyday Israelite, the text tells us it was a blessed life. Verse 20 reads, "Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea. They ate and drank and were happy." And then note what the author

tells us in verses 24-25: “And Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, all the days of Solomon.” The picture here is a fabulously wealthy king ruling over a contented people who enjoy the blessings of their own property.

In addition to economic well-being, Israel also enjoyed the blessing of security. In 2 Samuel 7:10-11, the Lord had promised to David, “And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies.” David never knew the blessing of a settled state of peace. He was a man of war who faced enemies on all sides and from within his kingdom. But after David won victories in battle, his son Solomon enjoyed the blessing of peace and security. Verses 24b-25a read, “And he had peace on all sides around him. And Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba.”

And then finally, Israel experienced the blessing of Solomon’s wisdom and reputation. Verses 29-31 read, “And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol, and his fame was in all the surrounding nations.” Ethan and Heman are mentioned in connection with Psalms 88 and 89, and the Calcol and Darda were their brothers, according to 1 Chronicles 2:6. These were the elite men of wisdom of their day, and yet Solomon was greater than all of them. He was the G.O.A.T. of wisdom (Greatest of All Time). Continuing on with verse 32: “He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005.” We have a collection of these proverbs in the biblical book of Proverbs, and one of his songs we know as the Song of Songs, or the greatest song of them all.

But it gets really interesting in verse 33: “He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish.” Solomon is a scientist, a new Adam who takes dominion over creation by the use of language to describe the wonders of creation, just as Adam used language to name the animals in the garden. And verse 34 caps it all off: “And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom.” The blessing of God extends not only to the nation of Israel under Solomon, but through Solomon, it begins to extend to the other nations of the world. The author of 1 Kings is saying, “Do you remember God’s promise of blessing to Abraham? Promise kept.”

Land. Descendants. Blessing. Remember who Abraham was when God first made these promises to him. He was Abram from Ur of the Chaldeans, a worshiper of false gods, an aging man with a barren wife. And he was promised as many descendants as the sand on the seashore. Yet for 25 years after that promise was first made, Abraham and his wife Sarah had no child, and it was not until he was 100 years old that the son of the promise was finally born. Fast forward several hundred years, and Abraham’s descendants have become a multitude, but they are slaves in the land of Egypt. By God’s power, they went from slavery in Egypt to heirs of their own land, to a blossoming kingdom, to a major political and economic power on the world stage, with a king widely known as the wisest man in the world. From an elderly, barren couple to a great

nation, God made promises to Abram that were against all odds of ever being fulfilled, and then over a period of a thousand years, he fulfilled each one. First Kings 4 celebrates the faithfulness of God to his Word. But at this point we must understand that the promises made to Abraham don't end there. The promises of Genesis 12, 15, 17, and 22 come to fulfillment on two different levels. The first level is what we might call the typical kingdom, which is what we see here in 1 Kings 4. It is the earthly kingdom of Israel at its pinnacle. But the typical kingdom is itself merely a picture of a greater kingdom yet to come. Ultimately, God made promises regarding an antitypical kingdom, or what the New Testament calls the Kingdom of God. In the antitypical kingdom, the land of Canaan gives way to a new creation. The physical descendants of Abraham give way to Jesus Christ, the true offspring of Abraham (Gal. 3:16) and a worldwide family of all who are united to him by faith. The earthly blessings experienced by Israel give way to heavenly blessings of eternal life in the presence of God forever. If you can see the promises to Abraham having those two levels of fulfillment, you have an outline for the rest of the Bible's story after Genesis 12. First comes the typical kingdom of Israel, which rises and then falls. Then comes the antitypical kingdom of God, which endures forever.

We look back on the time of Solomon today so that we might remember what God has done in the past. The God who faithfully brought the promises of the typical kingdom to fulfillment will also faithfully bring the promises of the antitypical kingdom to fulfillment. The Bible itself makes this connection for us. In Micah 4:1-5, the prophet foretells,

“It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it, and many nations shall come, and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; *but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree*, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. For all the peoples walk each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever.” The picture of the kingdom of God as one in which each man sits under his vine and his fig tree is Micah's way of saying, “The kingdom that is to come will be like Solomon's kingdom, only far better.”

We sing together, “The King of love my Shepherd is whose goodness faileth never. I nothing lack if I am his, and he is mine forever.” Can you really sing about God's unfailing love when you have cancer, or when your marriage is the greatest source of pain you experience in life, or when the fact that you are not married is the greatest source of pain you experience in life, or when your child has been hospitalized, or when you have faced the pain of not being able to have children? How can we celebrate the love of God for us if we don't really feel all that loved at the moment? Is it really true to say that God's “goodness faileth *never*” when it seems like his goodness faileth quite often? Are we just singing fairy tales to ourselves?

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18, “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to

the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” According to Paul, our present sufferings are light and momentary. How can he possibly say that? Is he simply being callous to the deep reality of suffering? No. Paul himself was no stranger to suffering. But he can call it all “light and momentary” by viewing it in comparison with the eternal weight of glory that is to come. So if you are in Christ, that means your marriage problems, your chronic illness, your pain at the suffering of your own children, or the pain of not being able to have children, your trust issues tied to past abuse you have experienced, the burden of guilt you carry over past failures, all of these things and more are actively working together to prepare for you an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. Take it all—all the trauma of your past, the sufferings of today, all the things you dread in the future—and add it all up together. It is all but a drop that will one day be utterly swallowed up by a vast ocean of joy that you will know in the presence of God. Because that is true, we can honestly and joyfully sing, “The King of love my Shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never. I nothing lack if I am his, and he is mine forever.”

In Harper Lee’s classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the protagonist Atticus Finch, a southern lawyer in the town of Maycomb, Alabama, had the audacity to defend in court a black man, Tom Robinson, against the charge that he assaulted and raped a white woman, Mayella Ewell. The story is set in 1935, which was in the thick of the Jim Crow era. In the course of the trial, Atticus not only raises sufficient doubt about Tom’s guilt, he proves beyond any reasonable doubt that Tom, who only had one functioning arm, was not capable of committing the assault of which he was accused. And Atticus knew that, in addition to proving his case by means of the evidence, he would also have to combat racism among the all-white jury. In his closing argument, he said this:

“We know all men are not created equal in the sense some people would have us believe—some people are smarter than others, some people have more opportunity because they’re born with it, some men make more money than others, some ladies make better cakes than others—some people are born gifted beyond the normal scope of most men. But there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal—there is one human institution that makes a pauper the equal of a Rockefeller, the stupid man the equal of an Einstein, and the ignorant man the equal of any college president. That institution, gentlemen, is a court. It can be the Supreme Court of the United States or the humblest J.P. court in the land, or this honorable court in which you serve. Our courts have their faults, as does any human institution, but in this country our courts are the great levelers, and in our courts all men are created equal. I’m no idealist to believe firmly in the integrity of our courts and in our jury system—that is no ideal to me, it is a living, working reality.”

The kingdom that is still to come—the hope of Heaven—is no ideal to me. It is a living, working reality. Heaven is for real, every bit as real as the kingdom God built under Solomon. So may we set our mind on things above and anchor our hope in things unseen. Amen.