

They Turned His Head

I Kings 9: 1-9, 11: 1-8

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So I was watching a show the other night, and I heard this line delivered sincerely from one of the characters. “Love is never wrong.” What do you think of that statement? At first listening, it sort of sounds right, doesn’t it? I mean, who could be against love? Love is never wrong. This phrase has a companion, and I’ve heard it several times from contemporary characters: “You can’t help who you love.” When love gets awakened for someone, that’s beyond your control, so you might as well give in and go for it. Love is a force, somehow both within you and yet untamable by you. “Love is never wrong. You can’t help who you love.” What per cent of people on the street do you think would agree with those statements?

Love is a potent word. And a powerful force. It’s at the heart of our ancient faith. Jesus himself affirmed the greatest of the commandments: you shall *love* the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” Love is at the very core of our relationship to God. Now we’ve been following the story of King Solomon, the greatest of Israel’s kings. Early on, we read that “Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of David his Father” (I Kings 3: 3). Out of this love for the LORD I AM, Solomon had asked for wisdom to know good from evil so he could govern well the nation. God had responded by blessing Solomon with astonishing wisdom. And then, in response to Solomon’s love, the LORD gave him great wealth and success in whatever he did. Solomon built the Temple, and much, much more.

If you follow the story of Solomon, you see that the wealth of the nations began to flow into Jerusalem. The beautiful Queen of the African nation of Sheba came to see Solomon and she was so impressed that the Bible says, “there was no more breath left in her” (I Kings 10: 5). Solomon built fleets of ships. He created a city just for his chariots. And he outfitted his army with shields of gold. He imported exotic animals to his palace and made a magnificent throne for himself out of ivory. Everything he did succeeded. The hand of God was clearly upon him. Never before or since had the kingdom seen such splendor. These were the glory days of Israel.

But another question arises. How much wealth could you safely handle? I know, the first answer out of your mouth is probably, “At least a little bit more! I’m sure I could handle an increase, say 20%, without a problem.” All right, but what then? How much is enough? What happens when you have so much that kings and queens can’t catch their breath? Would such wealth begin to unhinge you? You might begin to think you had immunity from mortal frailty. Or from ordinary moral constraints. You might think you were untouchable. And you might not yet feel fulfilled. You might even be bored and looking for more.

So I Kings 11 tells us what happened over the 20 years of Solomon’s glorious reign. “Now King Solomon *loved* many foreign women...from the nations concerning which the LORD had said, ‘You shall not enter into marriage with them...for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods.’” The LORD had forbidden his people to marry outside of the nation of Israel. Is that because Israel’s God was a racist? Did the Creator of all people actually despise some ethnicities? Of course not. But God was in the midst of his massive redemption project with the human race. And the first part of that plan included creating a nation that would be a light to the world. He established a people who would show the world who God is. By keeping the will of God given in his Law, they would show the world the way to human flourishing. Their community life would reflect the image of God. The knowledge of the true God had been obscured in the world by human sin. Israel’s faithfulness would show him clearly again. So, if Israel lost their distinctiveness, they would have nothing to offer. If God’s people became just like everyone else, they would lose their purpose. They would be of no use in revealing the true God. The LORD knew that marrying those who worshipped idols would lead to Israel turning to those same idols, thus sinking back into the darkness. So Solomon had been warned.

But the text tells us that Solomon did not just desire these foreign women. He *loved* them. It’s the same word used in the greatest commandment for how we are to love God, and the same word used to describe Solomon’s love for the LORD. So Solomon did not just lust after these women, he truly loved them. And then we read that Solomon “clung” to these women in love. That’s an odd word. He clung to them. He held fast to them. It’s a word with an echo. Way back in Genesis 2, we read of the creation of the woman for Adam. And we hear these famous words, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife.” Some versions read, “cling” or “cleave” to his wife. Solomon found more than attraction to his 700 wives. He loved them and clung to them. He had a kingly capacity to give away his heart each time.

That takes us back to the original question. What do you think of this statement? “Love is never wrong. You can’t help who you love.” Really? Solomon followed his heart. He had genuine affection for his foreign wives. He loved them. Each one and all 700. And thus he plunged the glorious nation into centuries of roller coaster chaos. “Love is never wrong.” Except when you give your love to someone forbidden. “You can’t help who you love.” Except that you can. Love takes fuel. Fuel comes from imagination, words, gifts, time spent, and the cultivation of desire. You can help those things. That’s why after ninth grade, most good girls stop trying to love bad boys. They stop giving their hearts to heart stompers. Not because those bad boys aren’t still attractive, but because they know the *Twilight* fantasy of making Edward the vampire into a nice guy just doesn’t work. Or, if you’re a thirty year old teacher and you fall in love with a middle school student in your class, it doesn’t matter how sincere your feelings are. You have to help it because that love is wrong and leads only to destruction. We’ve got to grow up as a culture and realize that we are not helpless before our desires and not every desire must, or should be, fulfilled.

OK, that’s the obvious part. But this passage is about something much deeper than what should be the obvious constraints mature people put on their passions. It’s about idolatry. An idol is a substitute for the true God. It’s something to which we devote ourselves. Something we look to for meaning and fulfillment. Beyond what is appropriate and in lieu of giving our first love, our first devotion to the Triune God. We can make idols out of perfectly good things, such as jobs, houses, works of art, sports teams, singers, or even spouses. Crossing the line occurs when the object dominates our hearts. Or becomes an ultimate goal. Now idols are always attractive in our minds. They promise pleasure and fulfillment. In the short term, they may deliver. In the long run the returns diminish, the idols disappoint at best, enslave us at worst.

Let’s just take a few examples. Swirling that the third small batch bourbon in your glass, a love can grow. Expressed in a secret conversation. “I love this drink. This is my secret friend. I want to have this always. Here in this glass I feel alive and safe and free. This is mine. I will never give it up.” Not that I’d know anything about that. . . . Freedom very soon, however, becomes enslavement. We have loved inappropriately and our lover disappoints us.

Another example. Over the last decades, our culture has elevated romantic love to god-like status. The less we acknowledge a real God who is over us, the more we look to a partner to fulfill our deep needs. Countless movies and books depict people expecting their lovers to deliver fulfillment in their souls. We get

married believing “You can give me what I’m missing.” What disappointment we face when we realize no human being can give us continually that deep sense of meaning. No person can be our sole purpose. No spouse, no matter how wonderful, can stay on a pedestal, or endure worship as a god or goddess. But when the idolatry of romantic love persists amidst disappointment, we seek new partners to give us what only the true God can give us, leaving a wake of destruction behind us.

The dark side of our idolatry of romantic love is the epidemic of pornography. Viewers can actually fall in love with the characters they meet on the screens. And no real life person can come close to the manufactured ecstasy. Studies now show that pornography is crippling the ability to relate to real people, especially in men. Freedom becomes enslavement. We have loved inappropriately and our lover disappoints us.

Somewhere along the line, Solomon got twisted up about all that he had been given. Somewhere, he began to think it was his because he was special. It was his as an entitlement. And he had so much he did not need the LORD I Am. Sometime in his secret thoughts, he thought he could live independently of God and his will for his people. He started believing he had life in himself, power in himself, and that it would never end. He forgot that all we are or achieve or have is derived from God. And we only find pleasure in these gifts when we give thanks for them as gifts, not possessions or earnings or ours by right.

For the heart of idolatry is that I want to find meaning and purpose and life on my own terms. I don’t want to need God. I want God to give me what I want, then step off the stage and leave me to it. I want God for me, and all his gifts for me. The idol promises it can all be mine with no demands. But it lies. There is a great contrast between the devotion required by the true God and the promises offered by an idol. The idol promises to let me be in control, though in the end it enslaves me. God demands that I surrender my will to his first, which seems so narrow and constricting, but in the end, after surrender, I find full freedom in God. It’s only when I realize my life is not for me but for God that I find the joy and peace I seek. It’s only when I give thanks, and hold these things of the world but lightly, that I have freedom.

Paul exposed the root of our idolatry in the opening chapter of his letter to the Roman Christians. He wrote, “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened....they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and

worshipped and served the creatures rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1: 21,25). When we don’t connect to the source, we lose our way. When we do not give thanks, we go plumb stupid about what matters. When we do not draw from the life of our Creator, we seek to fill our thirst from created things. They may satisfy for a moment but then they always disappoint. We are eternal beings made to live from the eternal God and made to live for the eternal God. Without that eternal perspective, we don’t get smart. We get silly. We don’t see beyond the moment. We fall prey to disordered desires and inappropriate loves. We worship idols and we shrivel up.

Solomon was the wisest man in the world. He had everything, including a connection to the living God. But he let those exotic women from other nations turn his head. He took them to himself and with them the practices of the religion of their people. This was way more than the benign differences between denominations. Those pagan gods required of their worshippers self-cutting, child sacrifice, and drunken orgies. They required what destroyed people. And Solomon imported all of that into his realm. So the text tells us, “And the LORD was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel who had appeared to him twice.” He knew better. But still he sought life where there is no life. Within a few verses we read that the LORD raised up adversaries against Solomon. It had to happen. When we get untethered from the truth, we let evil in and then evil arises against us. It was the beginning of the end.

How ironic that it was Solomon himself who wrote in the Proverbs: “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it (Proverbs 4: 23 NIV). We don’t have to go wherever our heart urges us. My heart has appetites for some pretty awful things. I am prone to seek life in dead things. I am prone to being deceived that lesser things can deliver what only God can give. We need to guard our hearts.

We gather as a community of serial idolaters. We sit here in the tatters of our failed idolatry. The gods who let us down: the demanding goddess of success, the god of business, the god of wanting to be like everyone else, the idols of comfort or admiration or power. They all demand more and more, and always leave us empty. Solomon himself would warn us: guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.

The way home to God lies in cultivating healthy habits of the heart. Chief among them is honoring God by thanking him. We awake our spirits when we praise God, reflecting back to him who he is. Our hearts require the fuel of

knowledge. The knowledge of God's Word, where he has made himself known. Our hearts require the surrender of our wills to God's will so that we can come awake to what is true.

There is one image we are allowed to worship. One God alone worthy of our heart. His name is Jesus Christ. He is the God who loves us like a husband loves his wife. He loves us so much he held fast to us. He clung to what we are as he became one of us in the flesh. Then he held on to what we are, keeping his humanity forever as he returned to heaven. He loves his bride. And he wants us to love him with full devotion. For Jesus is the express image of his Father. He is the shining face of God toward us. Not the shiny trinket of an idol, but the radiance of God more brilliant than the sun. He is the one who alone can receive our worship and return to us the love and life we crave. Guard your hearts, dear ones, and turn them, resolutely to Christ the image of God.