

Sermon Research: 1 Kings 11:1–13

Passage

Core text: 1 Kings 11:1–13, Solomon’s turn from wholehearted covenant loyalty to idolatry and the Lord’s announcement that the kingdom will be torn from his house. The unit moves from disordered love (vv. 1–3), to a divided heart and public idolatry (vv. 4–8), to divine anger and covenant judgment tempered by covenant mercy (vv. 9–13).^{[1][2]}

Genre, speaker, and audience: This is theological historical narrative. The narrator evaluates Solomon by the standards of Israel’s covenant, while the Lord speaks the decisive judgment in verses 11–13; within the final form of Kings, the account instructs God’s covenant people by explaining how royal unfaithfulness set Israel on the road toward division and exile.^{[3][1]}

Big Picture

Solomon possesses extraordinary wisdom, privilege, wealth, and spiritual experience, yet none of these guarantees perseverance. The king who once loved the Lord (1 Kings 3:3) now “loved many foreign women,” clung to them despite God’s warning, and allowed those loves to redirect his worship.^{[4][2]}

The passage’s central concern is not ethnicity or intercultural marriage as such; the text explicitly identifies **idolatrous influence** as the danger. Solomon’s marriages violated the kingly command against multiplying wives and the covenant warning that marriages into idolatrous peoples would turn Israel’s heart toward other gods (Deuteronomy 7:3–4; 17:17).^{[5][1]}

The tragedy is both personal and corporate. Solomon’s divided heart produces public shrines, his disobedience damages the nation, and the kingdom’s coming fracture becomes part of the long decline toward exile; nevertheless, God preserves part of the kingdom “for the sake of David” and Jerusalem, showing judgment without abandoning his covenant purpose.^{[1][3]}

Literary Context

Within 1 Kings

Chapters 3–10 display Solomon’s wisdom, temple building, international renown, and immense prosperity. Yet earlier details—his marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter, accumulation of wealth, horses, and royal splendor—prepare the reader to compare Solomon with Deuteronomy 17:14–20; chapter 11 then gives the narrator’s explicit negative verdict.^{[6][4]}

The opening contrast is intentionally jarring: after the glowing account of wealth and power in 10:14–29, 11:1 begins, “Now King Solomon loved many foreign women.” The narrative thus overturns any assumption that visible success is reliable evidence of an undivided heart.^{[7][1]}

Within Chapter 11

The chapter has four movements:

- **11:1–13:** Solomon's idolatry and the Lord's sentence.
- **11:14–25:** The Lord raises Hadad and Rezon as external adversaries.
- **11:26–40:** Jeroboam emerges as an internal adversary, and Ahijah symbolically announces the division.
- **11:41–43:** Solomon's reign and death are summarized.^{[8][3]}

Verses 1–13 therefore provide the theological cause for the political deterioration that follows. The adversaries and divided kingdom are not presented merely as unfortunate geopolitics but as covenant judgment governed by the Lord.^{[9][3]}

Exegetical Insights

Disordered love: verses 1–3

- **“Loved” and “held fast.”** Solomon's problem begins at the level of allegiance and desire. The language of clinging is especially tragic because covenant faithfulness called Israel to cling to the Lord; Solomon instead clings to relationships God had warned would bend his heart toward other gods.^{[2][5]}
- **“Many foreign women.”** The wives include Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites. Many royal marriages were probably diplomatic alliances, a familiar political strategy in the ancient Near East, but political usefulness did not make covenant disobedience faithful.^{[10][1]}
- **Seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines.** Whether every number is intended as a modern statistical record is less important to the narrator's point: Solomon flagrantly multiplies wives, precisely what Deuteronomy 17:17 forbids Israel's king to do.^{[2][1]}
- **Responsibility remains Solomon's.** The wives “turned his heart,” but the narrative does not excuse him. He knowingly held fast to these loves despite a clear divine warning and later chose to sponsor their worship.^{[1][2]}

Divided heart: verses 4–8

- **The repeated “heart” language controls the unit.** Solomon's heart is “turned,” is no longer “wholly true” or fully devoted, and finally turns away from the Lord. The fall is not a failure of intelligence but a collapse of covenant allegiance.^{[11][12]}
- **“When Solomon was old.”** The text portrays a long-term drift whose mature fruit appears late in life. A strong beginning does not remove the need for lifelong vigilance and persevering obedience.^{[13][9]}
- **Not wholly devoted.** Solomon apparently did not simply stop all worship of the Lord; rather, he added other gods, producing syncretism. In biblical covenant terms, adding rival gods is itself turning away from the Lord's exclusive claim.^{[14][9][^4]}

- **From affection to architecture.** Solomon progresses from loving what God forbade, to inwardly divided allegiance, to following other gods, to building high places where sacrifices were offered. Private compromise becomes institutionalized and publicly accessible.^{[2][1]}
- **David as the comparison.** “As David his father” does not mean David was sinless. In Kings, David functions as the standard of undivided covenant allegiance because, despite grievous failures, he did not legitimate the worship of rival gods.^{[8][1]}

Named gods: verses 5–8

- **Ashtoreth/Astarte** was associated with the Sidonians and with fertility religion; she had already been a recurring temptation in Israel’s history (Judges 2:13).^{[15][1]}
- **Milcom/Molek** is linked with Ammon. The textual and historical relationship between the names “Milcom” and “Molek” is debated, so preaching should not overstate their precise identification; the passage’s clear point is that this worship was detestable to the Lord.^{[12][5]}
- **Chemosh** was the national god of Moab, which elsewhere is called the “people of Chemosh” (Numbers 21:29; Jeremiah 48:46).^[15]
- **The hill east of Jerusalem** is generally identified with the Mount of Olives. The location intensifies the offense: rival worship is established in sight of the city and temple associated with the Lord’s name.^{[16][17]}

The text says Solomon built shrines and accommodated sacrificial worship. Some later biblical texts associate Molek worship with child sacrifice, but 1 Kings 11:1–13 does **not** explicitly say Solomon himself offered children; that claim should not be made from this passage alone.^{[15][1]}

Judgment and mercy: verses 9–13

- **The Lord’s anger is covenantal and personal.** Solomon has rejected not an abstract rule but the God of Israel who appeared to him twice, blessed him, and explicitly warned him (see 1 Kings 3:5; 9:2–9).^{[9][1]}
- **The verdict is moral, not merely political.** “Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD” becomes a defining evaluative formula throughout Kings. The Lord—not wealth, popularity, diplomatic success, or architectural achievement—renders the final assessment.^{[3][2]}
- **The kingdom will be torn.** Solomon’s multiplied alliances were intended to secure the kingdom, yet his disobedience becomes the reason it will divide. What appears politically prudent becomes spiritually and nationally destructive.^{[7][1]}
- **Judgment is delayed and limited.** It will fall during Solomon’s son’s reign, not Solomon’s, and the entire kingdom will not be removed. These limits do not minimize Solomon’s sin; they highlight God’s faithfulness to the Davidic promise.^{[3][1]}
- **“One tribe.”** The expression centers the surviving Davidic kingdom in Judah; Benjamin was closely joined with Judah, and 1 Kings 12:21 explicitly names both. Interpreters differ on how the chapter’s tribal arithmetic should be explained, so the sermon need not force a solution beyond the clear point: God preserves a Davidic remnant centered in Jerusalem.^{[18][19]}

Biblical-Theological Links

Torah fulfilled in warning

1 Kings 11 deliberately echoes Torah:

- **Exodus 20:3:** The first commandment requires exclusive worship.
- **Exodus 34:12–16 and Deuteronomy 7:3–4:** Israel must reject alliances that entice it to serve other gods.
- **Deuteronomy 17:14–20:** Israel's king must not multiply horses, wives, or silver and gold; he must live under God's written law.
- **Deuteronomy 6:4–5:** The Lord's uniqueness demands whole-person love rather than divided allegiance.

Solomon's reign demonstrates that God's warnings are not arbitrary restrictions. The precise danger named in Deuteronomy—many wives turning the king's heart—occurs in the narrative.

[⁵][1]

Davidic covenant

Second Samuel 7:12–16 promises an enduring Davidic house while allowing fatherly discipline for disobedient sons. First Kings 11 holds both realities together: Solomon is judged, yet the dynasty is not extinguished “for David's sake.”[²⁰][1]

This tension carries the biblical story forward. Human Davidic kings repeatedly fail, but God preserves the line and the “lamp” in Jerusalem (1 Kings 11:36), maintaining hope for a faithful Son of David.[²¹][3]

Toward exile

Solomon becomes the first great royal example of the apostasy later repeated by Israel's kings. The kingdom divides in chapter 12, idolatry deepens, and both kingdoms eventually experience exile; Kings simultaneously insists that apostate kings brought judgment and that God's promise to David did not fail.[¹][3]

Christ connection

The passage should not be made into an allegory, but its canonical trajectory creates a genuine longing for a better king. Jesus identifies himself as “greater than Solomon” (Matthew 12:42), receives the throne of David in an everlasting kingdom (Luke 1:32–33), and embodies the faithful obedience the failed son of David lacked.[²²][23]

Solomon's divided heart fractures the kingdom; Christ's perfect allegiance secures an unshakable kingdom. The contrast supports gospel proclamation: wisdom, privilege, and human kingship cannot rescue sinners from divided worship, but the faithful King fulfills God's covenant purpose and calls for undivided allegiance.[²³][3]

Historical Background

Royal marriages commonly served diplomatic goals, binding ruling houses and stabilizing relations between kingdoms. This helps explain why so many of Solomon's wives are described as princesses, but the narrator evaluates the policy through covenant law rather than international custom.^{[7][1]}

A **high place** was a cultic worship site, commonly involving an altar and sacrificial activity. Solomon did not merely tolerate private devotions inside the palace; he used royal power and resources to establish public facilities for rival worship.^{[24][9]}

Background claims about the exact rites of Ashtoreth, Molek/Milcom, and Chemosh vary in certainty. The safest preaching emphasis is the narrator's own language: these are "other gods" and "detestable" objects of worship whose accommodation violates exclusive loyalty to the Lord.^{[5][15]}

Theological Themes

- **God is uniquely worthy of worship.** Covenant faithfulness permits no spiritual rivals; syncretism is not broad-minded devotion but covenant betrayal.^{[14][3]}
- **God's word proves true.** The very consequence God warned about—the turning of the heart—comes to pass when Solomon disregards his command.^{[2][1]}
- **The heart directs worship.** The narrative traces public apostasy back to disordered love and divided allegiance; outward structures eventually reveal inward loyalties.^{[11][12]}
- **Privilege does not guarantee perseverance.** Solomon received wisdom, blessing, divine appearances, and responsibility for the temple, yet he still turned away.^{[9][1]}
- **Leaders' sins spread outward.** Solomon's personal compromise becomes royal policy and contributes to national fracture.^{[3][1]}
- **God judges justly.** The division of the kingdom answers repeated, knowledgeable, covenant-breaking disobedience.^{[1][2]}
- **God remains covenant-faithful.** The punishment is real, but the Lord preserves David's line and Jerusalem according to his prior promise.^{[3][1]}
- **Human wisdom cannot save the human heart.** Solomon's collapse shows the difference between giftedness and godliness, knowledge and obedience, insight and enduring faithfulness.^{[4][11]}

Sermon Big Ideas

1. A divided heart eventually produces divided worship and a divided life, but God remains faithful to his covenant promise.
2. The loves we cling to shape the gods we follow; therefore, guard wholehearted devotion to the Lord.
3. Spiritual privilege cannot substitute for persevering obedience to God's word.
4. Solomon's failure exposes our need for the greater Son of David, whose heart and kingdom will never be divided.

Fallen condition focus

People with real knowledge of God still allow rival loves, cultural pressures, and apparent advantages to divide their allegiance and redirect their worship.

Proposition

Because divided loves turn hearts from the Lord and bring destructive consequences, God's people must pursue wholehearted allegiance to him and find their hope in the faithful King he has provided.

Sermon aim

Call hearers to identify and repent of tolerated rival allegiances, to take God's warnings seriously, and to entrust themselves afresh to Christ, the faithful and greater Son of David.

Outline Possibilities

The Drift of a Divided Heart

1. A forbidden love embraced — Solomon clings to what God warned against (vv. 1-3).
2. A faithful heart divided — tolerated compromise matures into idolatry (vv. 4-8).
3. A secure kingdom torn — God judges disobedience yet remembers his promise (vv. 9-13).

What Solomon Forgot

1. God's word was clear — the danger had been named beforehand (vv. 1-3).
2. God alone was worthy — adding other gods was turning from the Lord (vv. 4-8).
3. God's verdict was decisive — success could not cancel covenant accountability (vv. 9-11).
4. God's promise remained sure — judgment did not destroy the Davidic hope (vv. 12-13).

The King We Need

1. The wisest king could not guard his own heart (vv. 1-4).
2. The glorious king led his people toward false worship (vv. 5-8).
3. The powerful king could not preserve his kingdom (vv. 9-13).
4. The faithful God preserved the line of the greater King (vv. 12-13; 11:36; Matthew 12:42).

Illustration Directions

- **Structural cracks:** A nearly invisible crack in a foundation can eventually affect the whole building. Use carefully: the point is not that every sin grows identically, but that tolerated compromise can become structural.
- **Navigation drift:** A small uncorrected change in heading becomes a large difference over a long journey. This fits the text's movement from clinging, to heart-turning, to public

idolatry.

- **Exclusive covenant:** Marriage vows help explain why “adding” another loyalty is not harmless supplementation. The analogy aligns with Scripture’s own covenant logic but should not be pressed into every detail.
- **Gift versus character:** Exceptional competence can coexist with serious moral failure. Use a verifiable public example only if needed; the text itself may be the strongest illustration.

Application Avenues

Believers

- Ask not only, “What do I believe?” but, “What has my heart, and what am I clinging to?”
- Identify accommodations that seem practical, relationally advantageous, or culturally normal but contradict God’s clear word.
- Reject the assumption that past faithfulness, biblical knowledge, ministry usefulness, or spiritual experiences make later drift impossible.
- Build habits of lifelong faithfulness: Scripture, prayer, gathered worship, confession, accountable relationships, and prompt repentance.

Church leaders

- Treat private holiness as a public ministry concern; the leader’s tolerated idols can become the community’s structures.
- Do not confuse giftedness, growth, wealth, influence, or impressive facilities with God’s final evaluation.
- Exercise special care when political, financial, or relational advantages ask for theological compromise.
- Plan to finish faithfully, not merely begin impressively.

Families

- Teach that the central question in close relationships is not race or nationality but spiritual allegiance and whether the relationship strengthens or competes with devotion to Christ.
- Model repentance rather than pretending that wisdom or seniority removes vulnerability.
- Consider which household practices quietly catechize loves: spending, entertainment, schedules, ambitions, and worship.

Unbelievers

- Solomon’s failure challenges confidence in intelligence, status, achievement, or religious exposure as cures for the human heart.
- The gospel does not merely offer better information; it announces the faithful King who saves rebels and gives his people new hearts for loyal worship.

Broader culture

- Political effectiveness does not determine moral faithfulness. Strategies that promise security may become destructive when they require worshipful allegiance to power, prosperity, approval, or ideology.
- Religious pluralism in civic society should not be confused with syncretism in Christian worship: Christians may defend neighbors' civil freedom while refusing to treat all gods as interchangeable.

Pastoral Cautions

- Do not blame Solomon's wives as though he were passive or morally innocent; the narrator holds the king accountable for knowingly disobeying and sponsoring idolatry.^{[2][1]}
- Do not turn the passage into a warning against interracial or international marriage. Ruth and other biblical examples show that ethnicity itself is not the issue; 1 Kings 11 specifies allegiance to other gods as the danger.
- Do not imply David was morally flawless. The comparison concerns wholehearted allegiance to the Lord rather than sinless conduct.^{[8][1]}
- Do not confidently assert Solomon's final salvation, damnation, or repentance. This passage records judgment and does not narrate his repentance; Ecclesiastes' relationship to the historical Solomon is a separate authorship question.
- Do not promise that every believer's compromise will produce consequences identical to Solomon's royal covenant judgment. Apply the enduring theological pattern while respecting Solomon's unique office and place in redemptive history.

Further Study Questions

- How deliberately does 1 Kings 3–11 arrange Solomon's story around the royal warnings of Deuteronomy 17:14–20?
- What does "heart" mean across Deuteronomy and Kings, and how does it relate to love, loyalty, worship, and obedience?
- Does the narrator portray Solomon's conduct as full apostasy, continuing syncretism, or both? How should "not wholly true" and "turned away" shape the answer?^{[4][9]}
- How does David function as the standard for later kings despite his grave sins?
- How should "one tribe" in verses 13, 32, and 36 be related to Judah and Benjamin in 1 Kings 12:21?^{[19][18]}
- What is firmly known about Ashtoreth, Chemosh, Milcom, and Molek, and which popular claims exceed the evidence?
- How do 2 Samuel 7:12–16, 1 Kings 11:36, Psalm 132:11–17, and Luke 1:32–33 develop the promise of David's enduring "lamp"?
- How can the sermon move from Solomon's warning to Christ's sufficiency without reducing the text to "Solomon failed; Jesus succeeded"?

- Which contemporary “prudent alliances” most tempt this congregation to exchange obedience for security, influence, affection, or approval?

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