

## Ask for Wisdom

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

<sup>10</sup> Then David slept with his ancestors and was buried in the city of David. <sup>11</sup> The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. <sup>12</sup> So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established...

<sup>3</sup> Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. <sup>4</sup> The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. <sup>5</sup> At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." <sup>6</sup> And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. <sup>7</sup> And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. <sup>8</sup> And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. <sup>9</sup> Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

<sup>10</sup> It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. <sup>11</sup> God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, <sup>12</sup> I now do according to your word. Indeed, I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. <sup>13</sup> I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. <sup>14</sup> If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

In a presidential debate, an audience member asked the candidates, "How would your religious beliefs, if you're elected, impact the decisions that you make in the office of the presidency?" One candidate insisted, "My religious beliefs wouldn't affect it. My religious beliefs affect my character in the way I treat people and the way I live... The only thing... that would affect me... is my oath of office and my promises that I've made to the people." Another asserted that religion should "suffuse your life" and "is inextricably tied in with how you behave." The magnitude of the office, he confessed, requires decisions "beyond the ability of

mere mortals to truly decide" and should drive the president to seek God's guidance.

Though the political context of the United States differs greatly from that of ancient Israel, this glimpse into Solomon's life invites us to reconsider the division of public and private spheres and the downgrading of religion to intrapersonal experience. Without hesitation, Solomon would insist that his religion impacts every decision he makes as king. For ancient Israel life in the public arena *is* the life of faith. A covenantal relation with God governs their entire way of life, and the monarch reigns as the one anointed by God, governing by proxy as ambassador of the Lord. Solomon recognizes the magnitude of the call and within the context of deep, personal devotion prays for wisdom.

In our scripture we witness the passage of time in the form of a transition in leadership, from David the shepherd-king to his son Solomon. While David was tragically flawed, his life, leadership, and devotion are clearly understood to be within the providence of God. His forty-year reign (a generation) signifies stability and security; a transition, on the other hand, always brings with it the possibility of disruption and chaos.

A chapter earlier, Solomon's reign begins with a flurry of executions as he reestablishes the Davidic throne against would-be rivals (1 Kgs. 2:13-46). In Israel's history we are given a portrait of Solomon as he assumes the mantle of leadership. Solomon loves the Lord, he offers sacrifices, and he walks in the statutes of God. His practice of faith is both religious and ethical. What truly secures Solomon's success and inaugurates his reign as servant of God is a divine encounter. "Solomon loved the LORD" and frequently worshiped on the altar at Gibeon (1 Kgs. 3:3, 4). During one such pilgrimage, Solomon's worship extends into his sleep, where a conversation unfolds with God. "Ask what I should give you," the Lord invites (3:5).

Before answering, Solomon humbly reflects upon his father's legacy. While David's military prowess and political achievements were more than noteworthy, something much deeper proved foundational to his success. In Solomon's eyes, God's "steadfast love" made David great. He was "your servant," Solomon tells God, and "walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart" (3:6). Consequently, he rose from tending sheep to the throne of the people of God. Now Solomon muses, how will I get there from here? You have made me king, and yet "I am only a little child." I know neither "how to go out [n]or come in," yet I am in the midst of a great people too numerous to count (3:7, 8).

The magnitude of his circumstance and his trivial ability free him to admit that human glory is always a copy, even for the king. It comes from God and God alone. With modesty Solomon confesses his youth and his lack of experience in leading an army. In humility and elegance, he admits his skills are dwarfed by the demands of the task (3:8).

"If God promised to give you whatever you ask, what would you ask for?" Big crowds and big dollars attend the preachers of "the prosperity gospel," and asking for "riches" features regularly in their intercessions. A plea for "long life" would allow Solomon time to remedy his immaturity. Solomon's greenness at leading men into battle could be quickly counterweighed by asking "for the life of your enemies." We can think of all manner of things we might ask for.

"Give your servant," Solomon asks God, "an understanding mind to govern your people" and the ability "to discern between good and evil" (3:9). Solomon does not ask God for fame and fortune. To the contrary, he asks for understanding, for a king's wisdom to lead God's people.

The king's request for right judgment bespeaks an integrity and character worth modeling. In this view, Solomon's "people first" perspective is precisely what

makes a great king great. His response is pleasing to God (3:10). In fact, God pledges to give the king not only the wisdom he seeks but "riches and honor" too (3:13). It is God who gives. Whatever wisdom the king possesses is a gift from God. Likewise, whatever honor and wealth Solomon realizes in his life are given to him by the Lord. **Andrew Nagy-Benson**

In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve forfeited their glory by asserting their independence from God and their right to determine good from evil. Solomon's prayer for wisdom suggests a return to Eden and God's original intent for human beings. Simply acquiring the skills necessary for international diplomacy or economic development would not be enough. According to the wisdom tradition, wisdom is "more than human ability to master life; it [is] hidden with God and [has] to be given to human beings." In fact, such intimacy exists between wisdom and God that the quest for understanding and discernment necessarily leads into the divine presence. Recalling his father's legacy, Solomon acknowledges his limitations and surrenders to God. In dependence upon God, his reign is established. **Sean A. White**

What is our greatest priority? What is our deepest desire? What are the basis of our faith, convictions, and core values? Life often presents us with decisions to make and paths to walk that clarify the desires of our hearts.

Commentator **Kenneth H. Carter Jr.** recalls a conversation with a wise mentor who made a distinction between two types of leaders. Does a leader think he or she can change their organization, or not? If the answer is no, the leader will use a leadership role for their own self-gain. If the answer is yes, the leader will exercise power for the common good. Solomon is aware that wisdom, a gift of God, will allow him to govern the people. He uses the power and benefits of the office for the good of the people.

What Solomon asks for is "an understanding mind" or "a discerning heart" (3:9). Solomon asks to be equipped for the central work of the king: to make judgments, "to discern between good and evil." Solomon asks for the very gift that is needed. He is led to the appropriate next step—a dependence upon the Lord who gives wisdom and discernment so he may govern the people.

"A listening heart" could be the very thing we need to discern among the voices clamoring for our attention in the media. "A listening heart" would be welcome at the dinner table—when or if the family sits down to a meal together. "A listening heart" could transform the dramas enacted in board rooms. To imagine "a listening heart" at the heart of our government could cause us to dream as boldly as Solomon. Solomon woke from his dream, but people the world over keep dreaming that dream of one who governs being able to discern with "a listening heart." People want to be heard, but they want more than for their grievances to be noticed: they want a leader with the wisdom to help them sort through complexities of good and evil. That would be more than sufficient, as the Lord recognizes in awarding Solomon even the "riches and honor" he does not ask for and anticipating the words of the son of Solomon (Matt. 1:6-7): "Strive first for the kingdom of God... and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt. 6:33). **Patrick J. Willson**

As we hear the ancient story of Solomon and reflect on it, we discover lessons that challenge and comfort. We are immersed in a culture that clamors for advantage, power, and possessions. The possibility of having our greatest wish granted is like winning the lottery; it is a fantasy of a transformed life, where we are, in an instant, placed in a position of power, influence, and control over others, or perhaps over all.

Of course, our patterns of behavior are conditioned by the culture, and the absence of a winning lottery ticket does not discount the allure of such an outcome.

The questions are appropriate even in our most mundane circumstances: What is our deepest desire? What is our core value? These questions are relevant for individuals and institutions, for congregations and communities.

The text also brings comfort. God offers wisdom to those who are receptive; God exalts those who are humble. There is an echo of Solomon's experience in the Christ hymn found in Philippians 2: we are encouraged to have the mind that was in Christ Jesus, who "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." In the context of humility and receptivity, there follows the gift of God who "highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name." No king will compare with Solomon (1 Kgs. 3:13); and yet, "every knee should bend... and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:10, 11).

We are often inclined to seek the honor, recognition, and status. We forget the conditions by which these outcomes may or may not occur: the religious, ethical, and mystical practices that shape us, walking in the statutes of the Lord. The common witness of both the Old and New Testaments describes the qualities of a life that is pleasing to God: we empty ourselves for others, we seek the common good, we put the needs of others before our own, we acknowledge our dependence on a higher power.

This passage is a lesson in how one assumes a leadership role and lives in a relationship to the God who is gracious and, at the same time, powerful. Perhaps Solomon's example moves us to examine our uses of power and influence; and perhaps, as we read of his experience, we will become more receptive to the One who spoke and speaks in dreams, who gets our attention, who yearns for leaders who seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness. **Kenneth H. Carter Jr.**

While not all are called to political leadership, the tasks of every life vocation eventually outpace our ability to match them. From raising children to making

decisions for ailing parents, from managing family finances to balancing trillion-dollar budgets, our ability to discern good from evil has been severely compromised. It is not all about raising children, balancing budgets, or even leading a great nation. Perhaps these too are petty gifts. With Solomon, may we see that the beginning of wisdom is God. **Sean A. White**

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