

## “A Wise and Discerning Mind”

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

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There is some more great stuff in the reading from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, which we’ve been exploring for the past couple weeks, but today I want to shift gears and focus our attention on the passage from 1 Kings about King Solomon. There is a *tremendous* amount of wisdom in that passage.

To review, for those of you who don’t know or don’t remember, Solomon was the third – and last – ruler of the united kingdom of Israel and Judah. First there was King Saul, who went mad. Then there was King David, Saul’s son-in-law, who had a long reign of forty years. David greatly expanded Israel’s territory, conquered most of Israel’s enemies round about them, and took the city of Jerusalem from the Jebusites and made it his capital. But the latter part of David’s reign was plagued by internal troubles, mostly centering in his own family. One of David’s sons raped his half-sister; another son murdered the rapist (his half-brother) and later launched an all-out rebellion against David that resulted, for a time, in David’s exile from Jerusalem. And, of course, there was David’s adultery with Bathsheba.

David and Bathsheba’s illegitimate child died as infant. But after they were married, David and Bathsheba had several other children. The first of those was Solomon, whose name means “peaceful.”

Solomon probably didn’t expect he would become king. He had a half-dozen older half-brothers, the offspring of David’s unions with his various wives (David had eight of them!). One half-brother, Adonijah, proclaimed himself king in a power-grab. But the prophet Nathan brought the news to the dying King David. David – fulfilling a promise he had made to Bathsheba – declared that *Solomon* should rule, and sent Nathan and Zadok the priest to anoint him, and place him on the king’s mule in front of all the people. Solomon may have only been about 15 years old at the time. There follows some more political maneuvering on Adonijah’s part, that ultimately results in the arrest and execution of him and his allies. Once that unpleasant business was concluded, Solomon was the undisputed king.

The Bible describes the character of the young King Solomon like this: “Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places.” A “high place” was a place of worship at the top of a hill or mountain. There were many of these throughout Israel; often these were leftover remnants from the various nations that Israelites had defeated. Often they would feature a stone monument, a wooden pole identifying the place as a sacred shrine, a stone altar, on which sacrificial offerings were burned, and a cistern for water. Many towns had their own high place, to which the locals would ascend to worship. These were certainly convenient. But the Israelites had been instructed in the Law of Moses to “demolish all the high places” that had previously existed in the land (Numbers 33:52), and they had not done that. Once the Israelites settled in the land, the bulk of the people – including Solomon – began worshiping at these high places.

He particularly worshiped at a place called **Gibeon**, a hilltop city a few miles north of Jerusalem. The Bible implies that, some time before Solomon's ascension to the throne, the tabernacle that had been constructed in the wilderness had been erected here, so it was a particularly special place. It must also have been especially large, for we are told that Solomon made a thousand sacrificial offerings here.

It was there, at Gibeon, that Solomon received a vision from God. God said to him, **"Ask what I should give you."** Solomon, the youthful king of Israel, could have asked for *many* things: long life, or riches, or the lives of his enemies, or any of the other typical things that people in power often wish for. But he did not ask for any of those. Instead, he reflected on God's loyalty to his father David, and his own lack of knowledge and experience. **"I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in."** He told God he was **"in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous that they cannot be numbered or counted."** He is a young man, suddenly entrusted with the well-being of *God's whole people*, a big country with an even bigger mission. He feels completely under-equipped for the weight of the responsibility. He says: **"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?"** He doesn't ask for long life, or riches, or victory over his enemies. He asks ... for *wisdom*.

Imagine that.

Imagine if every President, every Governor, every Mayor prayed ... *for wisdom*.

Imagine if every Senator, every Representative, every Supreme Court justice prayed *for wisdom*.

Imagine if every legislator, every judge, every city council member prayed *for wisdom*.

Imagine if every priest, every pastor, every rabbi, every cleric in every faith prayed *for wisdom*.

Imagine if every CEO, every director, every administrator, every manager prayed *for wisdom*.

Imagine if every superintendent, every teacher, every school board member prayed *for wisdom*.

Imagine if every athletic director, every coach, every trainer prayed *for wisdom*.

Imagine ... what a world we might have. *Imagine!*

The Bible says **"it pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this."** Young Solomon could have asked for *anything* – and he chose *wisdom!* God grants his request. **"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."** Solomon's wisdom became famous. The people of Israel "stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice." (1 Kings 3:28) "God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as 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." (1 Kings 4:29-30) "His fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations." (1 Kings 4:31) "People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom." (1 Kings 4:34) "The whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind." (1 Kings 10:24) "When the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon ... she came to test him with hard questions. She came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels bearing spices, and very much gold, and precious stones; and when she came to Solomon, she told him all that was on her mind. Solomon answered all her questions; there was nothing hidden from

the king that he could not explain to her....” She “observed all the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built, the food of his table, the seating of his officials, and the attendance of his servants, their clothing, his valets, and his burnt offerings that he offered at the house of the Lord.... She said to the king, ‘The report was true that I heard in my own land of your accomplishments and of your wisdom, but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes had seen it. Not even half had been told me; your wisdom and prosperity far surpass the report that I had heard.’” (1 Kings 10:1-7) For God not only granted Solomon *wisdom*; God also gave him the things that he had *not* asked for: “both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you.” (1 Kings 3:13) During Solomon’s reign, the Israelite monarchy reached the height of its splendor and wealth. This led to the construction of the ornate temple in Jerusalem, a royal palace, numerous other buildings in Jerusalem, waterworks projects, a defensive perimeter, the re-building of many other cities, the construction of a port, and more.

Solomon’s legacy has endured for nearly three thousand years. Many of the Proverbs in the Old Testament are attributed to him; there is also an apocryphal book called “the Wisdom of Solomon” that bears his name. You can find that in Catholic and Orthodox Bibles, and some Protestant study Bibles.

But, alas, Solomon’s great wisdom did not mean that he remained faithful to God. Solomon had a particular ... *fondness* for women. He married some women to secure alliances with foreign countries, but he also married many other women as well. The Bible says he had *seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines*. That is a *lot* of women. Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*, says “King Solomon was *obsessed* with women.” (1 Kings 11:1) Many of these women worshiped other gods, and as Solomon grew older, *he* started worshiping them too, sometimes even building shrines for them. The Bible says, “Solomon followed Astarte the goddess of the Sidonians, and Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not completely follow the Lord, as his father David had done. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. He did the same for all his foreign wives, who offered incense and sacrificed to their gods. Then 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, and had commanded him concerning this matter, that he should not follow other gods; but he did not observe what the Lord commanded.” (1 Kings 11:5-10)

So it would seem to be the case that *wisdom alone is not enough*. You can have a *tremendous* amount of wisdom and *still* be unfaithful to God. You could have *all the wisdom of Solomon*, and still go wildly astray, as Solomon himself did. You can still grieve God’s heart; you can still let God down. Wisdom is *good*, but wisdom is *not enough*. If you read through the Psalms and the book of Proverbs, you will find that wisdom is greatly to be praised. “Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding,” says Proverbs (3:13). “Get wisdom, get insight.” (Proverbs 4:5) “Wisdom is better than jewels.” (Proverbs 8:11) In the New Testament, we read that Jesus as a child was “filled with wisdom” (Luke 2:40), and Paul describes Jesus as “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). Various passages in the New Testament indicate that wisdom is something we Christians should strive to attain.

But Solomon’s life shows us that wisdom alone is not enough. Wisdom needs to be attached to a single-minded, faithful *devotion* to the Lord. A steadfast *fidelity* to God ... fidelity that Solomon lacked.

May we learn from the *wisdom* that Solomon had ... and from the *faithfulness* that he lacked.

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