

If You Could Ask for Anything

1 Kings 3:1-15

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If you could ask God for anything, what would you ask for? Our response to that question says something about who we are and what's important to us.

God gave Solomon the opportunity to ask God for anything. This offer followed a time of palace intrigue and royal rivalry around the death of Solomon's father, King David. Solomon was finally established as David's successor. He's now the king of Israel. He starts making political alliances through marriage. He begins construction on the royal palace, the Lord's temple, and the city wall. Solomon goes to worship at a "high place," a sacred site on a hilltop. He offers a thousand burnt offerings to the Lord at a place called Gibeon. Then he apparently sleeps near the altar seeking to hear from the Lord.

God appears to Solomon in a dream and makes a far-reaching offer: "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." Do you think God still makes such an open-ended offer to us? I believe so, but God also reserves the right to edit and purify our requests to fit God's will. Two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, once approached him and said, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." They were either bold or clueless—maybe both. Jesus listens to their request, but then he says, "You don't know what you are asking" (Mark 10:35-38). He has to correct their understanding of what he's about and what kind of kingdom he's Lord of.

God offers to hear and answer our prayers and to purify them into the kind of prayer that he longs to answer. Our prayers, our requests, need to be filtered through faith and forgiveness: "'Have faith in God,' Jesus answered. ...'Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses'" (Mk 11:22-25). Our requests also need to be consistent with the character of Christ. "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You

may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:13-14). To pray *in Jesus' name* is to pray the kind of prayer Jesus would pray. It's to allow our requests to be filtered through the character of Jesus, asking God to keep whatever's consistent with what Jesus is like and whatever will glorify God. At the same time, we're asking God to remove anything in our prayers that's not like Jesus and wouldn't be to God's glory.

We don't just toss off a prayer like that. It takes time and experience and growth to learn to pray that way. Notice how Solomon responds to God's offer. He remembers what God has done and he puts his experience in the context of what God has done. He remembers the great mercy God showed to David. That's God's steadfast love or covenant mercy. David received God's faithful love as he walked before the Lord in faithfulness, righteousness, and uprightness of heart. David committed some major sins and made some serious errors in judgment. But he always threw himself on God's mercy and relied on God's faithful love. Part of God's showing steadfast love to David was in giving him a son to rule in his place. That's what God's doing as Solomon begins his reign. God's faithful love in the covenant continues.

Now Solomon acknowledges his place as God's servant and as king in David's place. Then he shows humility, admitting that he's like a child and he's unskilled in leadership. He doesn't know how to be king. Solomon sees the difficulty in his task and he admits that he can't handle it by himself. He needs help. What does it take to get us to admit that?

After remembering God's faithful love and admitting his need, the heart of Solomon's request is: "So give your servant a discerning heart ["an understanding mind" (NRSV), "a receptive heart" (*Word Biblical Commentary*)] to govern your people" (v. 9). He wants a heart open to receive instruction from God, to be guided by God. He wants to be able to tell right from wrong and to make good decisions as he judges between people and leads the nation.

We generally see this as a prayer for *wisdom*. And, a little later, the Lord says that he will give Solomon a wise and discerning heart. So God told Solomon to ask for anything and he asked for wisdom. That seemed to be what he needed the most in order to rule well.

We need wisdom. Wisdom is more than being cunning or crafty. It's more than having lots of knowledge. We're up to our eyeballs in information these days, but so often we lack the wisdom to determine which information is truly worthwhile and what to do with it. Knowledge is like a tool kit—it's functional. Wisdom is using it properly. Wisdom is a way of life that takes time to develop. It involves thinking about our experience. It includes brokenness, failure, and even not knowing. We often gain wisdom from examples or mentors (Mike Pasquarello, "Trinity and Preaching," DMin class notes, Asbury Theological Seminary, 1/27/05).

God was pleased with what Solomon asked. Since Solomon had asked for understanding to discern what's right, God says, "I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart." And, God promises to give more than Solomon asked for. "You didn't ask for riches and honor, but I'm going to give them to you anyway." Then there's a conditional promise that echoes Deuteronomy: "If you walk in my ways and obey my statutes and commandments as David your father did, I will give you a long life."

Following God's gracious and generous reply to his request, Solomon worships. He woke up and realized he had been dreaming. Then he returned to Jerusalem, stood before the ark of the Lord's covenant and offered sacrifices. Then he gave a feast for his whole court.

When we begin to see how good and great God is, we're drawn to worship. The New Testament shows us that the sacrifice of Jesus was once for all and ended the need for the sacrifices, burnt offerings and so forth that were part of the Old Covenant. But the NT writers still use some of that sacrificial language to talk about our commitment and devotion and worship. Paul writes, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (Romans 12:1). The writer of Hebrews says, "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (13:15-16).

Here Solomon starts out well. He's humble, he sees his need, he asks God for what he needs, and he worships the Lord. He'll go on to take full advantage of his international contacts, his wealth, and Israel's break from war during his reign. That was Israel's "golden age." Solomon dedicated himself to literary pursuits. His collections of wise sayings earned him a reputation beyond any of his contemporaries and made him the great patron of Israel's wisdom literature (LaSor, Hubbard, Bush, *Old Testament Survey* 254). That "wisdom literature" includes Job, some Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs (or, Song of Solomon). Solomon has been credited with writing much of that portion of Scripture. Even if he didn't write all that's attributed to him, he influenced Israel toward seeking wisdom, toward seeing how life works and trying to understand God's ways.

Listen to how he talks about wisdom in Proverbs:

Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed. (3:13-18)

Later we see that Jesus embodies God's wisdom. At one point, Jesus referred to Solomon's reputation for wisdom and then, speaking of himself, said, "One greater than Solomon is here" (Matthew 12:42). We find true wisdom in being connected to Jesus, in relationship with him.

Jesus teaches wisdom. Many of his parables reflect Israel's wisdom tradition. For example, the parable of the two builders sounds like OT wisdom teaching. Whoever hears the words of Jesus and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. Whoever hears his words and doesn't put them into practice is like a foolish man who built a house on sand (Mt 7:24-27).

Next week we'll look at one of Jesus' stories that's sometimes called The Parable of the Shrewd Manager or the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-15). John Wesley based his sermon "The Use of Money" on some of what Jesus says there. That sermon of Wesley's is where we get the themes "Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can." Those ideas are based on wisdom we gain from Scripture and from Jesus who embodies for us and teaches us God's wisdom.

The NT letter of James includes this great promise: "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you" (1:5). Where do you need wisdom? Where could you use insight into life the way God intends it? Do you need wisdom in your relationships? Do you need it as you face some decision? Do you need wisdom to be a good steward of God's resources, of God's money? We can all use wisdom to be able to manage money and use it to glorify God and do the most good.

Often, Nancy and I have prayed about our finances. Sometimes it's a prayer for provision, to have what we need. Sometimes it's a prayer to be able to manage what we have, to use it wisely, to be good stewards. We've also read several books about personal finance.

In our devotional reading this week, there's a story about an elderly man who walked into a church office one day and asked the pastor, "What would your congregation do if you had access to two million dollars?" It wasn't just a theoretical question. The man told his story of being a soldier in the German army during World War II, fighting on the Russian front in a terrible winter. He developed typhoid fever and was gravely ill. But he was nursed back to health by a Russian Mennonite woman who had been forced to work in the German army hospital. Then, at great personal risk to herself and despite the fact that they were enemies in the conflict, the Russian Mennonite woman saved his life by providing papers that sent him home instead of back to the front.

After the war, the man started a new life in America, worked hard, and grew rich. He tried to track down the woman who had helped him, but he couldn't find any trace of her. He decided in her memory to make a gift to a

Mennonite congregation in America, and he selected this pastor's congregation from the phone book.

So how did the church handle a gift of two million dollars? They formed a committee so the money would be used wisely. They decided to support several different ministries, like Habitat for Humanity, overseas service projects, grants for youth attending Christian colleges, disaster response programs, and many others. A great deal of thought and wisdom went into the preservation and use of the funds (*Earn. Save. Give.: Devotional Readings for Home 22-23*).

Our church has wise people on Trustees and Finance and we have policies to guide the use of large gifts. We're always praying for wisdom to be good stewards of all the money that's given to the church.

God promises to give us wisdom when we ask for it. God gives generously. God gives without finding fault, without reminding us why we don't deserve his generosity. God's gift of wisdom is like God's gift of grace, God's gift of the Holy Spirit. The Lord gives generously where he finds open hands ready to receive because we know our need.

In this chapter of 1 Kings we get an ideal picture of Solomon. He's an example for us—of being humble, of seeking God's gift of wisdom, of seeking God, and giving ourselves to worship the Lord. Unfortunately, there's more to Solomon's story. He married many women in order to solidify political alliances. He eventually mixed worship of many gods with worship of the Lord God. That part of Solomon's story is a warning to us—not to squander God's gifts, not to rely on one particular talent or gift and not to think that one experience of prayer and worship is all we ever need. Godly wisdom means walking in God's ways all through our lives. Wisdom shows us that we don't know it all; we're still learning. Wisdom shows us that real life is in trusting God day after day.