

## “King Solomon’s Prayer”

1 Kings 2: 1-4, 10-12 & 1 Kings 3:1-15

If you could be given just one wish – anything at all – what would you ask for? Would you ask for a “do-over” to reverse one really boneheaded mistake? Would you ask for something for yourself ... your family ... our nation ... or bigger still? How long would you want to think it over before you decided? This morning we are going to read about a very famous king – you already know I’m talking about King Solomon – and what he replied when the Lord told him, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.”

That night-time conversation took place at a critical time for the nation of Israel. It was a time of leadership transition from one ruler to the next. Before we turn to the biblical text, let’s set the stage just a little. Only two men had been king in Israel before Solomon. For centuries before that, the people were led by men (and also a few women) who were chosen by God. Leaders, yes, but not royalty; not kings & queens.

We remember, first of all, Abraham whom God called away from the land of Ur; then Abraham’s son Isaac and *his* son Jacob. Each one led the members of their household from place to place, waiting for the fulfillment of God’s promise to give them a land of their own. Two weeks ago we spoke of Abraham’s great-grandson Joseph – how God took what his brothers meant for harm, to put Joseph in the right place at the right time with the right skills to save all of Egypt and all his own family from starvation.

We remember other leaders: Moses and his brother Aaron, coming repeatedly before the hard-hearted pharaoh declaring God’s command: “Let my people go.” We remember Moses holding up his staff as God parted the waters of the Red Sea, letting the Israelites escape to the other side ... Moses leading the people through long years in the wilderness ... Moses to whom God gave the Law: instructions for life and worship as God’s chosen people. And we remember when Joshua, Moses’ second-in-command, was given the task of leading God’s people as they finally – finally! – got the “go ahead” to enter and possess the land God had promised centuries earlier. God-chosen leaders; not royalty.

But once the people entered the land God had given to them -- once they began to feel settled -- they began to compare themselves to the nations around them. Instead of being grateful for the way God protected and even fought for them, they began to complain: “*We want to be like all the other nations! We want a king to go before us and lead us into battle!*” The prophet Samuel knew they wouldn’t be happy; knew that a

king would collect taxes and take the best livestock and most skilled workers for the royal court. Samuel warned the people what would happen, but they insisted: “We don’t care! We want a king!”

So God gave them what they wanted. He sent Samuel to anoint Israel’s first king, a man named Saul. If you’re familiar with that part of biblical history, you know that Saul was very tall and good looking. He looked every inch a king, but deep inside he was very insecure. That insecurity caused him to make some very bad decisions ... and more and more often, Saul began to do things HIS way, rather than God’s way.

So God sent Samuel to anoint another man who became king after Saul’s death. I’ll bet you know you that was -- that’s right, King David, the most famous king in Israel! Some aspects of King David’s life are like shining stars – high points of great courage and obedience to God -- like the time early in his life when he defeated the giant Goliath. David was a powerful warrior. He greatly expanded Israel’s borders and united the 12 tribes of Israel into one nation. But he wasn’t just a fighter. During his life he wrote many of the Psalms – songs and poetry filled with godly wisdom and praise for the Lord.

David wasn’t perfect – far from it. For example there was that ugly business that started when he looked down from the rooftop one evening and saw his neighbor’s beautiful wife, Bathsheba, bathing in the garden ... The Bible doesn’t gloss over David’s failures. But the Bible also tells us that David loved the Lord God with all his heart. When he failed – when he *sinned* – he turned back to the Lord in repentance. And the Lord honored David, calling him “A man after my own heart.”

David held the throne of Israel for many years. But now – when our reading takes place -- David is very old and very feeble. He has at least nine grown sons but for whatever reason he has not publicly named a successor. Nor has God sent a prophet to anoint a new king. Finally David’s eldest living son Adonijah grows impatient. He thinks if he gathers a bunch of supporters and declares himself king, maybe David won’t do anything to stop him. And maybe he would have gotten away with it ... but Nathan the prophet and Bathsheba both come to tell David what Adonijah has done. They remind him of a promise he made long ago: that Bathsheba’s son Solomon would sit on the throne.

And David remembered his promise, and he ordered that Solomon immediately be anointed king over Israel, to sit on David’s throne and rule in his place. So it was done; Solomon was anointed king, and Adonijah’s plan was frustrated. Let us turn now to 1 Kings chapter 2, beginning with verse 1: [read 1-4 ... 5-9 contains specific advice about how to keep old friends and deal with old enemies ... read 10-12].

(repeat): Solomon's "rule was firmly established." That didn't happen overnight; Solomon had to deal with a sneaky attack from his brother Adonijah and some others who had conspired with Adonijah against King David. But finally -- more than three years later (1 Kings 2:39) -- Solomon was the undisputed ruler.

We're going to turn now to chapter 3, verses 1-15.

v 1-3 *Solomon made an alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt and married his daughter. He brought her to the City of David (that is, Bethlehem) until he finished building his palace and the temple of the Lord and the wall around Jerusalem. The people, however, were still sacrificing at the high places because a temple had not yet been built for the Name of the Lord. Solomon showed his love for the Lord by walking according to the statutes of his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places.*

"High places" were located on hilltops throughout the region. Since the Temple had not yet been built, it was permissible for the people to offer sacrifices to the one True God at "high places," as long as they did not follow pagan worship practices. Incense, however, was to be burned only before the Ark of the Covenant.

v 4 *The king went to Gibeon to offer sacrifices, for that was the most important high place, and Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar.*

This could mean 1,000 all in one day, or could be 1,000 over a period of time.

v 5-9 *At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, 'Ask for whatever you want me to give you.' Solomon answered, 'You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day. Now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties.*

Solomon does not mean that he was a child in chronological age. Most scholars estimate that he was between 15 and 25 years old when he was anointed king. Rather, he is comparing himself to the age and experience of his father David.

v 9 *Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too*

*numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?’*

Notice, Solomon didn’t ask for wealth – security through having an abundance of worldly possessions and being able to “buy” people’s loyalty.

He didn’t ask for victory or vengeance – security through the death of his enemies. He didn’t ask for power or military genius

He didn’t ask to be famous – to be honored as a “big name”

What Solomon wanted was to be able to be open to the Lord’s voice and to govern well.

*v 10-15 The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, ‘Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have you asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. And I will give you what you have not asked for – both riches and honor – so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in my ways and obey my statutes and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life.’*

*Then Solomon awoke – and he realized it had been a dream. He returned to Jerusalem, stood before the ark of the Lord’s covenant and sacrificed burnt offerings and peace offerings. Then he gave a feast for all his court.*

This is the Word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

Notice with me, please, that after waking up, Solomon had no doubt his dream was from God. He immediately went back to Jerusalem, goes into the Tabernacle and offers sacrifices there. That was the place, according to the Hebrew Bible, where God’s presence rested. It is not enough for Solomon to worship at the “most important” of the high places. He wants to worship and give thanks in the very presence of the Lord. And then he goes out and throws a big feast for his court, so they can celebrate with him the favorable word from God.

What was the favorable word? That God was PLEASED by Solomon’s request. That’s the lesson I want us to walk away with today. Most of us are never going to have one ten thousandth of the responsibility that King Solomon had. But we all need what he prayed for -- and we need to pray FOR it, on behalf of our leaders who DO have such great responsibility.

So, what is a “discerning heart” ? The Hebrew actually says, “a listening heart.” Some commentaries suggest that Solomon remembered all too well the pride and arrogance and scheming of his brothers Absalom and Adonijah, as well as certain others who wanted to have the throne. By contrast, Solomon wanted to always be able to listen and hear what it was that GOD wanted for him and for the nation. Others suggest that Solomon wanted to be able to listen carefully and understand the true needs of the people.

But Solomon didn’t just want to just HEAR things. Royal courts were full of intrigue and rumor, just as the halls of government can be filled with rumor and intrigue. He wanted to listen with discernment. It’s something we desperately need today.

We do a lot of listening, don’t we – to podcasts and the network news, to media personalities, to the opinions of friends and total strangers on FaceBook. In any given week we can be bombarded with tens of thousands of words and hundreds of different messages. It’s not enough to simply listen ... because listening without a filter can fill our minds with anxious and confused thoughts.

Some people have a pre-established social or political filter. They only “hear” messages from a particular group, a particular network, a particular point of view.

Solomon wanted to listen with a God-shaped filter ... God-given discernment in order to distinguish between right and wrong, so he would do what pleased the Lord ... so he could lead the people in following God’s ways.

This is the kind of discernment we need to seek, as followers of Christ.

How do we develop a God-shaped filter?

Prayer ... Scripture ... people who will speak God’s truth to us in love.

This is the kind of discernment we should seek in our leaders ... and, just as importantly, the kind of discernment we should pray that our leaders would develop.

Let it be so, Lord Jesus. Let it be so.