

1 Kings 3:6–28 — Give Thy Servant an Understanding Heart

Solomon's Prayer, God's Answer, the Burnt Offering and Peace Offering at Jerusalem, and the Two Women

Scripture Reading: 1 Kings 3:6–28

“And Solomon said, Thou hast shewed unto thy servant David my father great mercy, according as he walked before thee in truth, and in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with thee...

And now, O LORD my God, thou hast made thy servant king instead of David my father: and I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in.

Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people?

And the speech pleased the LORD, that Solomon had asked this thing... Lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart, so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee.

And Solomon awoke; and, behold, it was a dream. And he came to Jerusalem, and stood before the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and offered up burnt offerings, and offered peace offerings, and made a feast to all his servants.”

Solomon's Prayer: What He Said About His Father

Solomon's prayer opens with an acknowledgement of what God had shown to David his father: great mercy, according as he walked before him in truth, and in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart. These three things — truth, righteousness, uprightness of heart — describe the character of David's walk in connection with the kingdom. His personal failures were of a personal character; they were confessed. But his discharge of what had been committed to him — the carrying out of God's governmental order in the kingdom — was faithful. Solomon saw this and said so.

The phrase "he walked before thee" is significant. David knew God was watching him, and he walked accordingly. And yet there was more than that — the phrase ends, "uprightness of heart, with thee." Not just before him as under observation, but with him as in conscious companionship. That is the highest thing. To walk with God, as Enoch walked, as Noah walked. Solomon saw this in his father's life. What a thing it is when a child can look at a parent and say: he walked before God and with God, and I saw it.

I Am but a Little Child

Verse 7 is remarkable for its timing. By this point, Solomon had already dealt with Adonijah, Joab, Abiathar, and Shimei. He had acted as a king. There were no more challenges to his throne. And yet he says: I am but a little child; I know not how to go out or come in. He did not say, I have handled several serious governmental crises already and done well enough; I just need a little help with the ones ahead. He took a very low place before God.

This was genuine humility, not performance. It was fitting that such a one should receive what he asked for. And it was wisdom too, for what true wisdom does is help a man to know the difference between good and evil — to recognize the distance between himself and what is needed, and to go to the one who can supply it. Had this spirit been maintained throughout Solomon's long reign, how

very different the ending would have been. The Song of Solomon, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, taken in the likely chronological order of composition, trace the arc: the early warmth and love of the Song, the ordered wisdom of middle age in Proverbs, and the world-wearied vanity of Ecclesiastes in old age. But this — I am but a little child — is where it begins well.

Thy Servant in the Midst of Thy People

Verse 8 contains a lovely expression that almost passes unnoticed: “thy servant is in the midst of thy people.” The kings of the earth uniformly say, I am over my people. Solomon says, I am in the midst of them. Not over, but among. Not elevated above them in his own conception of himself, but placed within them, needing what they need, dependent as they are dependent. And he speaks of them as those God has chosen — a people that cannot be numbered for multitude.

That the people cannot be numbered echoes the very promise made to Abraham about his seed — and it is interesting that it was one of David’s failures to number and count that people. Solomon’s prayer implicitly recognizes this: they are beyond counting, and to attempt to count them is to fail to see them as God sees them. In this, Solomon shows he had observed and learned from his father’s error.

The Three Things He Did Not Ask For

God’s response in verse 11 notes three things Solomon did not ask for: long life, riches, and the life of his enemies. God explicitly commends him for these omissions. Each of these had been asked for by others in Scripture: Hezekiah prayed for more years and received them; Jabez prayed for the enlargement of his coasts and received it; Samson asked for strength one last time and received it. God answered all those prayers. The point is not that such requests are wrong — God graciously heard them. The point is what they reveal about the heart that

asks them: whether the heart is seeking its own welfare or seeking to discharge the work it has been given. Solomon asked for none of these, and that pleased the Lord.

What he asked for instead was an understanding heart to judge the people, to discern between good and bad. David understood God's heart; Solomon asked to understand man's heart — to have the discernment to judge rightly among his people. James wrote: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him." But the asking must be in faith, not double-minded. Solomon's request had the character of single-minded desire for one thing, and it pleased the Lord.

God's Answer: What Was Asked and What Was Not Asked

God gave Solomon the wise and understanding heart he asked for — such that there was none like him before nor would there be after. And then God gave him what he had not asked: riches and honour, so that there would be none among the kings like him all his days. These were the gifts given freely on top of what was sought. The pattern is consistent: when the heart is right and asks for the right thing, God gives more than was asked. But then comes the if of verse 14: "If thou wilt walk in my ways, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as thy father David did walk, then I will lengthen thy days."

That if was exactly what Moses had written in Deuteronomy 17 about the king: that he should write a copy of the law for himself and read it all the days of his life, that his heart not be lifted up above his brethren and that he not turn aside from the commandment to the right hand or to the left, to the end that he may prolong his days in the kingdom. God said to Solomon nothing more and nothing less than what Moses had written. The condition for length of days was the same then as it was when God first gave it through Moses. The flesh in Solomon was ultimately unable to meet that condition.

He Came to Jerusalem and Stood Before the Ark

Verse 15 is marked by a movement: Solomon awoke, it was a dream, and he came to Jerusalem and stood before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. The conversation had taken place at Gibeon. The dream ended, and something in him moved him to the right place. He did not linger at the high place. He went to where the ark was. This is the act of a wise and understanding heart already beginning to operate: recognition that Jerusalem before the ark was the right place, not Gibeon at the great high place.

And there he offered differently. At Gibeon there had been a thousand burnt offerings — conspicuous in their number, but no mention of peace offerings. Here at Jerusalem there are burnt offerings and peace offerings together. This is a more intelligent offering. The burnt offering is the offering of acceptance — the whole given over to God, Christ as our acceptance before him. The peace offering is the communion offering, the shared meal, founded on the sacrifice. At Gibeon, Solomon came before God on a large and impressive scale; at Jerusalem before the ark, he came with the fullness of what the offerings express: acceptance and communion together. And then he made a feast to all his servants. God first; then joy and feasting. Worship before the feast, not the feast before worship.

The Two Women: Wisdom Applied to the Heart

The chapter closes with the case of the two women — a case that could not be resolved by any examination of outward evidence. Two mothers, two claims on one living child, no witness but each other. No human method could determine the truth. The wisdom God had given Solomon was not merely intellectual; it was moral discernment, penetrating to the intentions of the heart.

His solution — bring a sword and divide the child — was not a proposal to harm the child but a test designed to reveal what was in each heart. The true mother's

bowels yearned; she could not bear it and surrendered her claim. The false mother agreed to the division. The heart of each was revealed not by their words but by their response to a crisis. That is the wisdom from above: “first pure, then peaceable” (James 3:17). Pure, in connection with God being light — righteousness exposed. Peaceable, in connection with God being love — restoration and comfort. Solomon judged in that order.

All Israel heard of the judgment, and they feared the king, “for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to do judgment.” The wisdom was seen to be God’s wisdom because no human wisdom could have reached it. The secret of the Lord is with those who fear him — and it was that divine discernment, resting on the fear of the Lord in which Solomon delighted at the beginning, that solved what human methods could not.

Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart... that I may discern between good and bad.