

TEACH US TO PRAY: SOLOMON

SHERARD EDINGTON

I Kings 3:5-15

Today, we continue this sermon series called Teach Us To Pray. In this series, we are examining prayers—those special moments when people turn to God and pour out their souls. We are looking specifically at the prayers that we find within our scripture. We are asking what they teach us about the act of prayer. In the first week, we looked at Hannah who prayed for a child, then to Elijah who prayed for his death, and then to Paul who prayed for the congregation in the city of Ephesus.

Today, we come to the Old Testament book of I Kings to look at the prayer of King Solomon. I would like to bring this story to you in three iterations. The first will be the briefest. I'll call it the elevator pitch version—What's the gist of this story? The second will be a shorter summary. And the third will be a longer retelling.

The first version—the elevator pitch—goes like this. As King Solomon slept, God came to him in a dream and asks what he wants. In response, Solomon asks for the wisdom to lead and God gives it to him. That is pretty much what happens in this story. In a dream, Solomon prays to God asking for wisdom. As we learned last week from reading Paul's prayer, there is nothing better to ask of God than for wisdom.

The second iteration of my telling of this story is a bit longer. Solomon is king of Israel. He has only recently ascended to the throne on the death of his father, the great King David. Solomon has traveled to the shrine at Gibeon where he has gone to make sacrifices. During the night, as he sleeps, God appears to him in a dream and God says to the young king, *Ask what I should give you*. Solomon's reply, in this vision, is first to reflect on the relationship that existed between God and Solomon's father David. Solomon recounts the warm affinity that existed between God and David, how God loved David and how David walked in faithfulness with the Lord. As a result, God gave David a son, Solomon, to continue the monarchy. Solomon then reflects on his own lack of experience as a king and the awesome responsibility he faces as a ruler.

Then, after assessing his situation, Solomon's prayer to God is to ask for the wisdom to be a good leader. God is pleased with this request and grants it to him. In addition, God grants Solomon other blessings such as long life and riches and victory over his enemies.

In this telling of the story, we learn that when we pray to God, it is good to be able to frame our life in relation to God.

Finally, we come to the third iteration, the longest version of this story.

The year is 970 BC. Solomon is the king of Israel. At this point in history Israel has not yet split into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Israel is still a unified monarchy. Jerusalem is the capital. King David has died and his son has ascended the throne. Since becoming king, Solomon has entered into an alliance with the pharaoh of Egypt. To seal this alliance, Solomon married the daughter of the pharaoh—an act prohibited by God’s law. Israelites were only to marry Israelites. This marriage raises the question of how Solomon will lead his people and his nation. Will he lead them in the way of the Lord or away from the Lord?

In our reading for today, Solomon has traveled to a place called Gibeon in order to make sacrifices on the altar there. Gibeon is one of the high places of worship in Israel. During the night, while Solomon sleeps at Gibeon, Yahweh comes to the king in a dream. The Lord makes a simple offer, *Ask what I should give you*. This is a generous offer indeed. God is telling Solomon to ask what he wants from the Lord. It’s like a wealthy donor going to a political candidate with an open checkbook and asking, “How much do you need?” Who among us wouldn’t be thrilled at having God pose that question to us. Although there is no guarantee, the implication here is that God will give Solomon whatever he requests.

Before answering God’s question, Solomon first reflects on the relationship between his father David and the Lord. Solomon recalls the great and steadfast love God showed to David, whom Solomon calls *God's servant*. Why did God favor David so? Because David *walked before God in faithfulness and righteousness, and in uprightness of heart*. In another place, David is described as *a man after God’s own heart* (1 Samuel 13:14). In return, God gave David a son, Solomon, who sits on the throne today. Solomon is fully cognizant of how he got to where he is.

With this perspective, Solomon confesses that when it comes to being a king, he is *only a little child*. There is much he does not know. He recognizes that he is indeed a king and as king is servant over God's many people. Solomon understands that he must be a good steward of God's people.

Only after demonstrating that he grasps the big picture of who he is and what his responsibilities are does Solomon finally respond to God's original command, *Ask what I should give you*. Solomon says to God, *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?* That is the essence of this prayer, to ask for an *understanding mind*—in other words, wisdom.

If he wants to be a good king, Solomon admits to needing the wisdom to rule. He hopes that this wisdom will provide him with the ability to differentiate between good and evil. That is how he desires to lead.

Last Sunday, we looked at Paul's prayer to the congregation at Ephesus and how Paul prayed that the people would receive wisdom from God. Wisdom, as I said, is a deep knowledge of God; it is the ability to hold God in your heart, to embrace God in such a way that changes one's life. With wisdom, Solomon can rule in a manner that embodies the Lord.

Solomon's response pleases God, and God says to Solomon, *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, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind.*

Another person in this situation may have treated God like the genie in the bottle and asked for wealth and power and more. But this is not what Solomon asks for. He possesses the humility to recognize that he needs God's wisdom to be a good king like his father. He needs to be able to walk with God.

To be honest, Solomon would not have been out of line to ask for riches or power, because as a new king, he would need these things in order to establish himself with his people. It was common for a new king to inaugurate their reign with ambitious building programs and aggressive military campaigns in order to prove themselves as leader of the people. But Solomon is different. He does not ask God for these naked displays of power.

I doubt that any of us will ever become a monarch of a nation, but that does not mean that we shouldn't pray for wisdom for ourselves. Understanding God is the foundation of our faith. We can walk with God when we know God in our hearts. When you pray, ask for wisdom. Wisdom is not 'smarts'; wisdom is the ability to align our lives with God, to lead lives with the confidence that we are walking God's path. Wisdom is the ability to differentiate between evil and good.

As I said, this is the longer version of this story, but there is one more fact to take into consideration. That is the fact that this story takes place at Gibeon. Gibeon was what was known as a high place, a worshiping location. The temple at Jerusalem had not yet been constructed, and Israel had a network of these high places—locations such as Gilgal, Shiloh, Beer-sheba, and more. In Solomon's day, Gibeon was regarded as the most prominent of the high places.

The problem with these high places is that worship was not always limited to Yahweh. They could be like a cultic food court where one could worship the god or gods of one's choice. It is a bit problematic that Solomon was even there. The implication is that he was bringing offerings and sacrifices to a god other than Yahweh. As king, this would have been a way to connect with his people, especially the foreigners who occupied his land and worshiped foreign gods. However, as a follower of Yahweh, Solomon's actions bordered on sin. When God goes to Solomon

in that dream, it seems that God is interrupting Solomon at Gibeon, stopping him from his pagan worship.

And it works. When Solomon wakes from the dream, he appears to have seen the light. He returns to Jerusalem and immediately makes his way to the ark of the covenant—the locus of God’s power on earth. You will recall that it was King David who brought the ark to Jerusalem. Solomon makes offerings to Yahweh there. This is where Solomon should have been all the time, not at Gibeon, but Jerusalem, not with foreign gods, but with the Lord alone.

By appearing to Solomon in that dream, God successfully redirects this new king, reorienting him, setting him on a new path that leads to God. David *walked before God in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart*. But Solomon starts off on a different path. Solomon’s intentions were true, but he was headed in the wrong direction. God’s interruption changes this.

I would like to say that Solomon was a perfect king. He wasn’t. He made some mistakes and toward the end, his rule become heavy-handed. But, overall, the people admired his wisdom and regarded his rule with appreciation.

This is a lesson on prayer. When we pray, we should always ask for wisdom—the ability to know God in the depths of our hearts. But when we pray, we should not be surprised that our God has plans for us.