

SOLOMON'S REQUEST FOR WISDOM
Teaching-Learning Resources
BAPTIST LEADER

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Background Scripture: 1 Kings 3:3–28; 4:29–34

Key Passage: 1 Kings 3:3–14

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With this lesson we close the first part of this three-part series on “The Kingdom and the Early Prophets: God’s Call to Responsible Decision.” Our study of Solomon’s request for wisdom brings us to the high point of this unit on “Major Decisions in a Nation’s Beginning.” The study commenced with the biblical traditions concerning Saul’s rejection and his subsequent pursuit of occult wisdom in his desperate attempt to save his throne. The present focus of attention is on Solomon’s ascending the throne of Israel and his subsequent request for the wisdom of heaven so that he might have the most important thing needed to be a good king.

The three previous lessons have provided more negative than positive guidelines for Christian living. In our own nation Christians have contributed to bringing to an end both royalty and the “imperial presidency.” The dogma of the divine right of political rulers has been replaced by the demand for earthly responsibility and accountability. We concur with the passionate desire of David to stop the assassin’s hand. But we reject as unacceptable for Christian ethics fratricide, multiple marriages, political executions, and undisciplined family life, such as was common during some of the days of the early monarchy.

The most positive guideline in this unit is provided by Solomon’s request for wisdom.

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Happy is the man who finds wisdom. . . .

She is more precious than jewels. . . .

Long life is in her right hand . . .

and all her paths are peace.

She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her. . . .

Proverbs 3:13-18

Many Christians have assumed that in the New Testament Paul repudiated all that Solomon had to say in the Old Testament about wisdom. Many religious people have memorized Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:27: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise," or 1 Corinthians 3:19: "For the wisdom of this world is folly with God." Then some Christians have become very smug in a commitment to religious ignorance—even proud of having a closed mind. For such a person "foolish" has become a synonym for "faithful," and reason was rejected as the enemy of faith. Unfortunately, often the end result of such personal decisions is that genuine gullibility replaces honest spirituality.

The "warfare" between faith and reason, or science and religion, is a man-made battle. Paul does not repudiate or contradict Solomon, nor does Paul provide a biblical base for arrogant ignorance. The views of Solomon are supplemented by the words of Isaiah, whom Paul was quoting in 1 Corinthians 1:19 (see Isaiah 29:10–16). Isaiah denounced the stupidity of prophets and seers. They turned truth upside down (verses 9 and 16) to win an argument and illustrate the fact that

“. . . this people draw near with their mouth and
honor me with their lips,
while their hearts (i.e., 'minds']

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are, far from me,
and their fear of me is a commandment of men
learned by rote.”

Isaiah 29:13

Paul actually builds on Isaiah’s denunciation of human stupidity—even when practiced by the clergy who equated debating points with truth. Isaiah and Paul recognized that false prophets had proven their socio-theological positions with convincing arguments that seemed valid. They convinced their audiences much like a skillful lawyer can convince a judge or jury by skirting the truth. This is “worldly wisdom”—the quest for evidence to prove a point. The Gentile Greeks were comfortable with syllogistic reasoning since it made sense, and the Jewish community of Paul’s peers (much like the apostle Thomas) wanted dramatic evidence that would remove all doubt. But a lot of things that seem to make sense may not really be true; and when all doubt is removed, there is no opportunity for faith.

Paul did not repudiate Solomon, but he did repudiate the prostitution of wisdom which he labeled “the wisdom of the world” (1 Corinthians 1:20). On the other hand, Solomon aspired for the “wisdom of heaven,” God’s gift of wisdom, which he would honor by using it in his daily practice as the king over Israel. The heavenly wisdom was not esoteric knowledge but “an understanding heart” (KJV) and “an understanding mind to govern thy people, that I may discern between good and evil” (1 Kings 3:9).

Solomon’s decision for wisdom provides a model for all godly behavior. God did not give to Solomon a gift unfit for the Christian. [page 37]

The Biblical Setting

Solomon ascended the throne of Israel under very different circumstances than either Saul or David faced. Saul was made king only after his selection by God had been revealed to the prophet Samuel, with the subsequent acclamation by the people. David became king after God disclosed his will to Samuel; and David was anointed on three different occasions: first, the secret anointing by Samuel (1 Samuel 16:13), followed by the anointing by the men of Judah at Hebron (2 Samuel 2:4), and finally, the anointing by all the men of Israel at Hebron (2 Samuel 5:3).

By contrast, Solomon became king after a nearly successful coup d'état and attempted regicide. Nathan the prophet was not the spokesman with the unquestionable word of Yahweh at this time. Instead, he was one among many partisan politicians. His priestly counterpart, Abiathar, was pro-Adonijah and anti-Solomon. With open division among the religious leaders on the volatile issue of the next king, the anointed of Yahweh, King David, made the decision himself. Nathan told Bathsheba to tell David that he had promised to make her son Solomon the next king. John Gray, in his commentary on First and Second Kings, correctly notes that “since this is the first notice of an oath on the elevation of Solomon, this is probably a case of autosuggestion.”¹

Adonijah failed to accept the fact that the anointing of Solomon was the will of Yahweh; otherwise, it is difficult to understand his last desperate effort to undermine Solomon's position. Solomon did not become king by mandate of the

1. John Gray, *First and Second Kings: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), p. 88.

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masses nor by a unanimous decision of all interested political and religious parties. He commenced his kingly career on very shaky ground. The insecurity of his political base led him to strengthen his religious foundation. He went to the great “high place” at Gibeon which at that time, prior to the construction of the temple, was a center of Israelites worship (2 Chronicles 1:2–6). The magnitude of the sacrificial service was designed to indicate to God the magnitude of Solomon’s spiritual fervor. It was also a demonstration of power and wealth that could not be overlooked by the people.

Four hundred years before Solomon an Egyptian Pharaoh (Thutmose IV, 1421–1413 B.C.) reported a dream he had in which he communicated with his god. It is important to note the common theological assumption that dreams were a vehicle by which one could receive a message from the divine. Usually revelatory dreams were not clear in their real meaning, and an interpreter was always needed. But with Thutmose IV, as with Solomon, the message was direct and demanded no interpreter. Resting at noon in the shadow of the great Sphinx, the young Pharaoh was awakened within his sleep to hear the voice of his god, saying, “See me, look at me, my son! I am thy father. I shall give thee my kingdom . . . I waited to let thee do what was in my heart.”²

This parallel is certainly similar enough to the Solomon story to be called a literary prototype. But in terms of content, the dream of Thutmose IV is quite different. Thutmose’s god wanted to let Thutmose know what was in the mind of the deity resident in the Sphinx. Specifically, the Sphinx god

2. James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), p. 449.

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wanted Thutmose to become his protector and to remove the desert sands which were beginning to bury him: “The sands of the desert were encroaching upon me, but I waited to let thee do what was in my heart.”³ The deity was revealing his desire and affirming his dependence on the Pharaoh.

With Solomon and Yahweh the roles were switched. God wanted to know what was in Solomon’s mind; and Solomon wanted God to become his protector and benefactor. Specifically, Solomon wanted God to remove nothing but, rather, to add his gift of wisdom and knowledge (2 Chronicles 1:10).

Interpreting the Biblical Lesson

1 Kings 3:3—“Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father.”

It would have seemed very natural in this verse to have read the words “walking in the statutes of Moses.” But Mosaic legislation seems to have been ignored in the days of David and Solomon. The statutes of David were the model for Solomon’s behavior. One of the statutes that Solomon followed was the exercise of political executions. This certainly was incompatible with the Decalogue’s prohibition “You shall not kill” (literally, to commit “premeditated killing” or “assassination”) (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). Adonijah, Joab, and Shimei were killed by David’s indirect orders: “Act therefore according to your wisdom, but do not let his [i.e., Joab’s] gray head go down to Sheol in peace” (1 Kings 2:6).

Had Solomon walked according to the law of love derived from the Mosaic tradition, he would have loved God “with all his heart [mind], . . . soul, and . . . might” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

3. *Ibid.*

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But the decision for living by such a law of love came after the acquisition of wisdom, not before wisdom.

1 Kings 3:5—“The Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night.”

One cannot overlook the fact that God appeared to Solomon in an ordinary, night dream. It was not a special spiritual vision, nor a typical experience of prophetic insight. It was a dream, just a dream. As with any human dream, it tells a great deal about the dreamer. Solomon’s statement in the dream, “I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in,” is not a statement of historic fact but of a psychic reality. Solomon was old enough to be married when he ascended the throne of Israel, and child marriages were very uncommon. In this statement Solomon was expressing his insecurity and lack of self-confidence. [page 38] He recognized that he would need more strength than he personally possessed. Similarly, at the close of his dream Solomon was assured that he would have both riches and honor because he had first asked for wisdom (1 Kings 3:13). In historic reality Solomon had already inherited these from his father. But the psychic reality affirmed in the dream was his desire to give wealth and honor a subordinate position in his value system.

1 Kings 3:9—“Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad” (KJV).

The phrase “an understanding heart” is translated in *The New English Bible* as “a heart with skill to listen.” This phrase is most important for defining one element of possessing wisdom. First to be noted is that the Hebrew word “heart” is the equivalent of the English word “mind.” The Hebrews

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thought with their heart and felt emotions with other parts of the body. Therefore, when the word “heart” appears in the Old Testament, we need to replace it with the word “mind,” as is done in the Revised Standard Version. Thus, God’s gift to Solomon of an “understanding heart” was in reality a “listening mind.”

Perhaps Solomon shared a view still prevalent today that wisdom is best demonstrated by the tendency to talk a lot. If that were the case, he was, no doubt, surprised with the gift of a listening mind rather than a talented tongue. God’s gift to Solomon suggests that genuine wisdom is demonstrated in listening.

While teaching a class of ten-year-old boys, I tried to make them appreciative of using their ears more than their mouths. I coined for them this homemade memory verse: “God made no head large enough for both a great mind and a big mouth.” Subsequent experiences led me to believe that this maxim merits as much consideration by adults as by children. Talking demonstrates knowledge; but listening demonstrates wisdom. A friend reminded me recently of the proverb “Keep silent and be thought a fool; speak and remove all doubt.” A listening mind is foolishness to this world, but it may well be the gift of heavenly wisdom.

1 Kings 3:11–12—“God said to him, ‘Because you . . . have not asked . . . the life of your enemies, . . . behold, I now do according to your word.’”

In this dream Solomon sensed God’s pleasure with his putting a low priority on wealth, long life, and political revenge. Although one could argue that Solomon did not want the lives of his enemies because he had already followed David’s order and executed three men, it appears that

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Solomon really was not interested in continuous political revenge. In our previous studies on holy war, regicide, and fratricide was it strongly suggested that killing was not the pleasure of God, although it was the delight of many Israelites. The fact that God was well pleased with Solomon's *disinterest* in killing off his enemies confirms this earlier suggestion. David could not build the temple of God because he was a man of blood. He may have been a popular war hero in the eyes of the Israelites, but had provoked God's displeasure. By contrast, Solomon won God's good grace by his stance for peace instead of bloodshed. Solomon was indeed for *shalom*, "peace," and God was willing to grant him his request for wisdom because he had already demonstrated wisdom!

Applying the Lesson to Life

The fact that Solomon possessed both wealth and wisdom needs to be applied carefully today. Too easily a Christian may make the following syllogism: Mr. Jones has riches; Solomon had riches; Solomon was wise; therefore, Mr. Jones must be wise. The opposite syllogism is equally bad: Mr. Jones is poor; Solomon was not poor because he had wisdom; therefore, Mr. Jones is poor because he lacks wisdom. The Bible and our history books contain too many examples of people who acquired wealth because they were more cunning, crafty, and greedy than wise. One's financial status is not indicative of how much wisdom one possesses or lacks. Indeed, the truly wise man, said Jesus, seeks not the treasures of earth, where moth and rust consume, but lays up treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19–20).

As one must be careful in trying to correlate wisdom and wealth, so one must be equally careful in trying to equate education and wisdom. Not all wise people are well-educated

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people, and certainly not all well-educated people are wise. If available, education is the best stepping-stone for growing in wisdom. Jesus *grew* in wisdom and stature, and he grew by availing himself of the educational opportunities of his day. But education can also serve to foul and corrupt the nature of man. The lawyers who serve the interests of the Mafia are often as well educated as those who aspire to the Supreme Court. Education, when it is self-serving, is disqualified from being the stepping-stone to wisdom. As with Solomon, wisdom is not self-centered but service-centered. Solomon wanted wisdom so that he could judge the people with justice and integrity.

When education is denied to a person, he or she still has the opportunity to be wise. Persons can deny other people a decent education, but no one can deny another person the ability to be wise. Wisdom is not dispensed by man, but it is the gift of God.

Solomon's request for wisdom negates all attempts to make wisdom or reason the enemy of faith. Moreover, the dream experience of Solomon was compatible with Mosaic tradition and conforms to the instruction of Jesus. In Deuteronomy 6:4–5 the greatest commandment is stated: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." One cannot overlook the New Testament addition to the Old Testament text, for in Mark 12:29–30 the word "mind" is added to the commandment to explain the meaning of the Hebrew word "heart." One of the greatest things that we do is to love God with our *minds*. Therein we exercise the gift which God has made available to all of us—the gift of wisdom (James 3:13–18).