

**“What to Ask for Next:
King Solomon and His Prayer...”**

Text: “Lord, give me an understanding mind, that I
may discern between good and evil; for who is
able to rule over this great number of people?”

I Kings 3:9

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I wish you could have known King Solomon – he was quite a man. Admittedly the yearning is a little far-fetched because he lived and died in Ancient Palestine 3000 years ago. You could meet him if you believe that people can be teleported and travel back through time. But otherwise, it is not going to happen, least not until we meet on the other side of the great divide. By the way the remarkable new film from the novel by Audrey Niffenegger called, The Time Traveler's Wife, does exactly that. Henry DeTamble, the Traveler, has a rare genetic disorder dubbed “chronodisplacement,” which causes him to be whisked involuntarily back and forth through time and space: something like “Hey Scotty, beam me up,” from Star Trek fame, or familiar to those who follow “The Terminator,” made famous by now-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Someday human-kind might be able to do that, but until then we have to gather what we can about Solomon from the Scriptures.

Everyone agrees that he was King over Israel from 962 to 922 BCE. During those forty years God's people enjoyed unbounded prosperity, and for the first and only time since their origin to the present, the Israelis enjoyed peace and harmony with their neighbors. (Wouldn't that be nice, Peace in Israel?) Solomon elevated their tiny nation into one of the most powerful countries in the region. Under his rule the people of God were solidified into one unified nation, rather than the hegemony of tribal competition which plagued them all the way up to his father David's realm. Solomon formed alliances with several nations, often through marriage into their Royal families: like he married the daughter of Pharaoh and befriended Egypt. He also added Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian and Hittite women to his marital collection. (I Kings 11:1)

The Queen of Sheba was so impressed with his handsome persona that she came up to Jerusalem to visit him and lavished her precious gold and spices on him. (I Kings 10:1-10) Hurrah for Solomon. It was fantastic fun while it lasted I guess, but in time his weakness for the love of foreign women led to his downfall. He couldn't keep up with them and all of their social and religious preferences. They enticed him to honor their traditions and to approve the worship of their foreign deities. Let your mind wander a little: the Bible says “Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines,” like girl-friends with some frills. (I Kings 11:3) That's a lot of women!

He also liked to build huge public buildings, extravagant palaces and summer homes. And he saved his architectural best for the grandeur and glory of the magnificent, never-to-be-duplicated Temple of Solomon which consolidated the worship of Jehovah into one central place. When it was completed, God promised that, “His eyes would be open and ears attentive to prayers offered in this holy place,” (II Chronicles 7:15) meaning that if you could get to Jerusalem to pray in the Temple, the Lord God was more likely to answer your prayers than if you prayed them anywhere else. I wonder what you think of that. It is equivalent to asking whether you think the prayers offered here in the sanctuary are more likely to be answered than the ones that might be prayed out in the garden.

One reason I wish we could all go back and meet him is that while a copious amount of space is devoted to Solomon and his royal successes in the Old Testament, the accounts seem to contradict each other, and unfortunately there is no reliable historical source to verify what went on. The story we usually hear is taken largely from the Book of First Kings (Chapters 1-11.) There Solomon comes off as a man of great wisdom, insight, intrigue and power.

In Kings, Solomon becomes King David's successor in an unanticipated and rather bizarre series of events. In the Book of First Kings he never expected or sought to succeed his father. As

David grew older, some others of his other sons fought for the right to the throne. First was Absalom who launched an armed insurrection against his father. But while painful to the King and threatening to the nation, in the end it failed. Absalom was killed by the King's men in a hideous execution, which is told in intimate detail in II Samuel. You might remember that it broke his father's heart. (8: 9-15)

Next was Adonijah, a spoiled brat of a son who the Bible makes clear got everything he wanted from his father. He decided that he should be the Royal Successor. Assisted by Abiathar, the High Priest, and Joab, his father's chief of staff, he declared himself to be the heir apparent. He even threw a victory party to which he invited everybody who was anybody: except that Nathan, the King's favorite prophet, Solomon, his brother, and Bathsheba, Solomon's mother, did not receive an invitation, which brought ominous repercussions. (I Kings 1)

There was more to come. Nathan became pro-active in behalf of Solomon, why it does not say. He went to Bathsheba. Remember, she was the good looking young woman who lived next door to the Palace whose husband was Uriah. A dozen years earlier she had been invited to come over by the King for a private meeting in the Palace, which ended as one of the most remembered scandals of the Old Testament. By now she was Queen Bathsheba and the Mother of Solomon, who was probably 12 or so years of age. Nathan, the prophet-in-residence to David, instructed her to go to the King and remind him that he had previously anointed Solomon as his successor, even though they both knew that David had done no such thing. She was to lie and the prophet would swear to it, a most peculiar arrangement.

Nathan told her about Adonijah's victory party, but as Governor Thomas Dewey found out the morning after he ran against Harry Truman for President in 1948, his election was premature. Sadly for him, Adonijah did not succeed his father and he was soon executed for his attempted usurpation. But when Bathsheba tiptoed into David's quarters and whispered her concocted story to him, the King listened and believed her. On that very day he anointed Solomon as the next King and so he was, even if it was a rather skullduggerous and devious route to the Throne!

After his father's death, Solomon moved swiftly to consolidate his power. He not only eliminated his brother Adonijah, but he also had General Joab assassinated, along with many others, including one Mr. Shime-i, a noted leader who had sided with Absalom in his forays against David. (I Kings 2: 34, and 46) It all sounds like a disorderly transfer of power but then I guess you would have to say that Solomon was a man of his times, or a man like the succession of power in many modern states, including Iran.

But, not a word of all that appears in the story of Solomon as told in the equally inspired books of First and Second Chronicles. (I Chronicles I: 28 through II Chronicles: 9.) There we find an entirely different tale. According to Chronicles, near the end of his life King David assembled all the people of Israel together and announced that the Lord God had instructed him to anoint his son Solomon as his successor. No battles, no murders, no Absalom, no Adonijah, no concocted conspiracy between Bathsheba and Nathan. The ascendancy of Solomon is a smooth, well-planned and orderly succession. It says that the King groomed his favorite son for the job. He shared all he knew of the future, including some intricate plans for a new Temple that

Solomon was to build. And he even divulged his secret hiding places for the gold and silver and cedar that Solomon would need to adorn the House of God.

Back to Book of Kings: according to its author, Solomon was a man of unparalleled wisdom. Remember the story of how he proved it in the way he decided whose child it really was when two mothers claimed the little baby. First Kings says that “God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure and largeness of mind like the sands on the seashore, so that his wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the East and even all the wisdom of Egypt.”

But, in Chronicles, there is not even a little hint of the proverbial wisdom of Solomon nor of his books of wisdom to follow. (I Kings 4: 29-30) Not that he comes off as a dolt in Chronicles, but there it seems to say that he was young and inexperienced and in need of guidance all along the way. Without the help and counsel of the Lord God himself, it appears that he would never have succeeded.

Neither, unaccountably, is there a mention in Chronicles of the troublesome years of Solomon’s rule which are openly shown in Kings. Chronicles would have us believe the long reign of Solomon was entirely smooth and harmonious, untainted by the mishmash of the various troubles and the varieties of religious worship amply recorded in First Kings. In Chronicles his was a uniformly uncorrupted reign. There is no reference whatsoever to the turmoil told of the last years of David. You are left with the impression that the imminent breakup of the Northern Kingdom which came shortly after his death was no fault of Solomon: no foreign wives, no enticement to other deities, no nothing. Chronicles blames the demise of the United Kingdom on Jereboam, who soon after the death of Solomon led the departure of the northern portion of the Kingdom of Israel, while Judah was left in the south. The blame is partly shared by Rehoboam, Solomon’s son and appointed successor in Judah because Chronicles mildly admits, “in time he too forsook the commandments of the Lord.”

Meanwhile, the Book of Kings not only told of widespread conflict in King David’s later years, as we have mentioned, but it adds an additional sad and sorry conclusion to the last years of Solomon. Chapter 11, verse 9 begins, “And the Lord was angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the Lord,” especially in the matter of all those foreign wives he had married and acceded to their demands for alternative worship, even false gods which the King helped to establish and support. So the Lord said, “I will tear the Kingdom from you, Solomon, and give it to one of your servants.” (I Kings 11:11) The Lord God raised up adversaries against Solomon, who destroyed the Kingdom not long after his death, notably Jereboam, indeed one of Solomon’s former servants, just as the Bible said. He rose up in the ranks and finally was elevated into the top ranks of Solomon’s army. Jereboam later became the first King of the Northern Kingdom when it seceded from the Southern Kingdom of Judah and became a separate nation.

In Second Chronicles it says blithely that Solomon reigned successfully over Israel for forty years. Then, “He slept with his fathers, and was buried in the city of David his father; and Rehoboam his son reigned in his stead.” (II Chronicles 9:31) End of story, or rather stories!

Well, whatever, it is past time that we move on to the sermon. (I am sure you will agree.) As with many other people and occasions in the Scriptures, I guess we could conclude that both versions of his life are part of the truth. While far more diverse than the portrayal of Jesus in the four Gospels, the authors of the Books of History have their individual tales to tell and points to emphasize. Karl Jung once said that all things cast a shadow and so does every life. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” (Romans 3:23) is the way St. Paul says it, and so they do.

Which makes our text in First Kings 3 look all the more important and impressive. The authors tell us that Solomon went up to Gibeon to offer a sacrifice to God. Gibeon was in the hill country of Judah. Before the Temple of Solomon was built, both the Tabernacle, which would later end up in the Temple, and the famous Bronze Altar stood up at Gibeon. It says that Solomon made at least a thousand sacrifices on that altar.

In First Chronicles it specifies that he went up to Gibeon immediately after his coronation and he took all of his generals and his whole staff with him to dedicate themselves and seek the blessing of the Lord. (I Chronicles 1: 1-13) – a kind of religious retreat, a procedure which is not uncommon even to our own day. When a new King or leader is crowned or elected, they tend to go through the religious motions; I would add, with varying degrees of sincerity.

Anyway, on the night after he was anointed King, God appeared to Solomon in a dream, (at last we come to the heart of our sermon.) Are you listening? In the dream the Lord said to Solomon, “Ask anything that you want and I will give it to you.” Wow; it sounds like the Jesus promising in the Sermon on the Mount: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened.” (Matthews 7:7) Quite an offer! Solomon, what would you like to have?

Now, pause with me for a moment and let me ask you: If God were to appear to you in a dream tonight and offer to give you anything you would wanted, what would you ask for? One thing and one only! I will share Solomon’s answer with you in a moment.

Be careful: take some time and ponder your answer; because when you decide what your answer is and say it, you will know everything you need to know about yourself. What do you want most out of your life, whatever your present circumstances and whatever age you are, what do you value most?

Well, thankfully for our sermon, Solomon’s answer is nearly identical in both sources: First he thanked God for his steadfast love to his father David. Second he told God that he was humbled to have been chosen to succeed his father. Then he added: “But, I am just as a little child; I will never manage to go out and come in on my own. So, dear God, please help me to succeed. Give me an understanding mind that I may discern between good and evil and serve you all the days of my life.” (I Kings 3:3-9 and II Chronicles 1: 7-12)

What a prayer! God was so pleased with Solomon that he not only answered his prayer, he lavished a whole host of additional gifts on Solomon. The Lord said, quote: “Solomon, my son, since you have not asked for wealth or possessions or the lives of those who hate you, and since you did not even ask for long life and happy days for yourself, I will give you what you ask, ‘a wise and discerning mind to distinguish between good and evil’, and I will also add riches and honor and success and insights to help you walk in my way.” “Oh how nice,” Solomon

murmured, “thank you Lord, you are awesome indeed!” And, for the most part in I Kings, and for the entire journey in II Chronicles - the prayer and all of its promises came true.

Now, maybe you are bored to death with all this history and the story of Solomon. I am an historian. My mother used to tell me that if she wanted a history lesson she would have gone back to school, “I came to church to hear a sermon!” So, let me tack on a word or two, or even a couple more than that, and end with a tiny sermonic message for the coming days and months:

First, I want to speak a word to those of you who are going off to school this time of year, especially to those who are entering a new school or university. As you go, take hold of Solomon’s little prayer and carry it with you to make it your own. There are so many things all of us want for ourselves and those we love, that the number of our possible prayers are as endless as the sands on the sea shore.

But make your first prayer the one from Solomon. Say, “Lord, I am going off to a new portion of my life; as I go, please give me a wise and discerning mind that I will be able to distinguish between good and evil.” Say it again with me, “Lord, give me a wise and discerning mind that I will be able to distinguish between good and evil.” That’s the complicated problem, isn’t it: being able to decide what is right to do, and then finding the courage to do it? Be true to the best that you are and to all that your parents and family and others have invested in you.

Be careful and be watchful, for if you compromise yourself, you will have nothing left at all worth keeping. I will pray for you in this new autumn in your life, and in all your decisions yet to come, that you will remember the point of Solomon’s prayer. God bless you. One of Cromie’s Laws says that all beginnings are hard, especially the one you make by yourself. They sometimes are, but you are never by yourself, not really, not if you walk with Jesus Christ and ask him to walk along beside you. “Lord, help me to know the difference between what is good for me and those who love me and what is not.”

Then, there are others who are making other kinds of new beginnings this coming season. Some have to readjust following the loss of a job; or they have transferred in or out of the city. Others have had to modify their lifestyles with the declining economic conditions of the past couple of years. Some have to pick up the pieces of a broken marriage. Some have to deal with severe illness in themselves or with those they love.

Others are called upon to fill up the empty spaces left by the loss of one they loved too much to lose. Some others have too comfortably settled in to the routine of living. Others are just plain getting older and are bored or feel cheated by what they have or have not received. Whatever, it is time for something new. There are a myriad within the sound of my voice who have to decide what to do next in order to get up and get going again this autumn. What you decide to do is up to you, of course. But I offer you the first step - the prayer of Solomon: “Lord, give me the wisdom to discern between right and wrong and give the courage to act on what is best for me and for those I love.”

Some have dropped into a spiritual lethargy – a weariness of the soul and waning substance of the spirit. They need to find their faith again. If you have allowed it to slip or have postponed your decision far too long, you need to adopt the prayer of Solomon and add to it: “Lord give me a discerning mind so that I can distinguish between good and evil. Allow me to surrender myself and all of my hopes and fears to Jesus Christ and allow him to take control of my life. I cannot do it by myself. Please dear Lord, come into my heart anew.”

Or lastly look at it here at Sharon Presbyterian Church. Sometime in the coming months you will be welcoming a new pastor, at least I hope you will. Talk about newness. Your personal prayer and the congregational prayer we should all say together could be borrowed and paraphrased from Solomon:

“Lord, help me, help us. Give us wisdom to discern between good and evil, between what is right and wrong on your heavenly scale of values, not our own. Help us to reach out and share what we have with others around us, and not insist on preserving the past for sake of its preservation. Help me to get out of the way if I am a hindrance to what you want. Open me up to the future that I might be able to change one of my ideas, at least one! Help us all to be open to the guidance of the Spirit.

Help us to bend a little and to learn something more than we think we know. Help us to give up some pet ideas of what we think a Christian Church should be, so that we can be an enormous help, or at least not a continuing hindrance to newness and to a new ministry which in time will be a blessing not only to ourselves and our own folk, but to all the community around us and then to all the world beyond. Let it be new indeed. Help us to discern the difference between what is right and good for the kingdom of God on earth. Amen.”

Praise God. Somebody say Amen. I feel the Spirit coming in a dream right smack dab in the center of this Sanctuary, giving us the chance to ask for anything we want. What do you want most for Sharon Church? Pray God, please do not ask for something selfish and limited which perpetuates the past. Ask for anything you want, but be careful, for God might serve it up to you just as you ask. Look up and out to the future. Ask for wisdom to discern what is right and good; set aside your individual preferences so that as individual Christians, as Christian families, and as a congregation of God’s own people, we will know what is right to do in Jesus Christ, and to find the courage to do it, for now and forever more. Amen!