

1 KINGS 3.3-14: SOLOMON'S PRAYER FOR WISDOM

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1. SOLOMON WAS A MIXED UP PERSON

“Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statues of his father David: only he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places” (v3).

- Solomon may have loved the Lord – but he also loved foreign women. In the opening verse of this chapter we read how Solomon had married an Egyptian princess (3.1).
- Solomon may have loved the Lord – but he could be pretty ruthless in taking action against those he perceived as his enemies: in 1 Kings 2 we read of Solomon executing Adonijah, his elder brother and chief rival; and also of putting to death Joab, his father's former military commander.

From a spiritual perspective Solomon was a mixed up person – not surprisingly therefore he “he sacrificed and offered incense” at all kinds of ‘local shrines’ (The Message).

In some ways I am encouraged that Solomon was mixed up – because that gives me confidence that if God could bless Solomon, he can also bless me!

Q: To what extent do we regard ourselves as ‘mixed-up’ people too?

2. SOLOMON SOUGHT TO HEAR GOD AT NIGHT

Having taken action to establish himself in office (2.46) Solomon decided to hear from God.

- So he went to Gibeon, 6 miles north of Jerusalem, which was **“the principal high place”**. There he offered “a thousand burnt-offerings” (v4) – just imagine the stench of death!
- There in the sanctuary he spent all night, waiting to hear from God. This practice of sleeping in a holy place to receive some illumination or answer from God was well-known in the ancient world. It is called ‘incubation’. Solomon was not disappointed. For **“At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night”** (v6).

Although I have taken part in half-nights of prayer, I confess that the purpose of these prayer vigils was not to hear from God as to pray God's blessing on the life of his church.

I am not very good at night-time praying – I tend to fall asleep. But Solomon that night happily went to sleep, because he expected to hear from God in a dream.

Q: What do you find to be the best setting for God to speak to you? How does God speak to you?

3. SOLOMON BEGAN HIS PRAYER WITH PRAISE

Although Solomon does not actually say to God ‘I praise you and thank you’, nonetheless he begins his prayer by recalling three of the good things that God has done for him and his family:

1. *God made David, his father, a great king: “You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant, my father David”* (v6). I am not sure that Solomon got it right in saying that God blessed David “because he walked before you in faithfulness,

- in righteousness and in uprightness of heart” (v6b). At times David, like his son, messed up. In making David king a good deal of grace was needed on God’s part!
2. *God made Solomon king, in spite of his limitations.* See v7: **“And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in”**. This is something of an exaggeration: Solomon was no longer a little child, indeed he already had children. This is a metaphor in which Solomon declares his inexperience: “I am a mere child, unskilled in leadership” (REB)
 3. *God made Israel a powerful nation:* **“Your servant is in the midst of... a great people, so numerous that they cannot be counted”**. This was no piffling kingdom like present-day Monaco!

The NT speaks a good deal about combining prayer with thanksgiving: e.g.

- **“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God** (Phil 4.6);
- **“Devote yourself to prayer, keeping alert with thanksgiving”** (Col 4.2);
- **“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances”** (1 Thess 4.16-17).

Q: Why should our prayers begin with praise? What difference does it make?

4. SOLOMON ASKED GOD FOR WISDOM

“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” (3.9).

What precisely does Solomon ask for? According to NRSV, it was “an understanding mind”, the GNB speaks of his asking for “wisdom”; the NIV speaks of “a discerning heart”, while the REB speaks of “a heart with skill to listen”.

The REB offers the best translation, for the underlying Hebrew speaks of a ‘*heart to hear*’ or a ‘*listening heart*’. We mustn’t however make too much distinction between the heart and the mind – for according to Hebrew understanding the heart was perceived as the seat of both thought and emotion.

To be wise we need to listen – but to whom do we need to listen?

- According to The Message David said: “Give me a God-listening heart, so that I can lead your people well”.
- John Olley: “The gift of being open and able to listen to others is to be highly prized in leadership”

In the following story of the two mothers, each of whom claimed the baby was hers, did Solomon make his decision because he listened to God, or because he listened carefully to each woman?

According to RE Clements, wisdom here involves “shrewdness in judgement - insight into the hidden motives and desires that lie behind the words and actions of men and wisdom”. But wisdom also involves understanding ourselves. Wisdom is more than being clever.

Q: What do you think is the key quality of wisdom you need?

5. SOLOMON PRAYED WITH DISCERNMENT

“It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, ‘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” (3.10-12).

RE Clements: “Solomon’s prayer points to a central factor in all petitionary prayer which calls for careful reflection and theological caution. If petitionary prayer is no more than the presentation to God of a list of things that we would like to receive or to have done for us, it makes a nonsense of all prayer, because it sees God as no better than a weak and indulgent parent. Since God is loving and righteous by nature, the gifts conferred through prayer must be loving and righteous for use in the world. Prayer is not a means by which we can become the spoiled children of God!”

At this point I am reminded of the words of Jesus: **“If you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you”** (John 16.23). Here the key is not the asking anything, but rather the asking in Jesus’ name.

Q: How do we discern what to pray for?

6. SOLOMON CHALLENGES THE WAY WE PRAY

God said to Solomon: **“Ask what I should give you”** (v5) – ‘What would you like me to give you?’ (GNB). This question is reminiscent of the story of Aladdin’s lamp.

If God were to grant us one wish – if God were to say to you, ‘Ask what I should give you’, what is that one thing we would want more than anything else?

Unlike Solomon, we haven’t a kingdom to rule – our circumstances are different.

Would we really like to win the lottery? Or would we like to be a famous celebrity?

Let’s be honest: a little more money could make all the difference in the world.

A million pounds to put in the pension fund – or rather £900,000 if we were to tithe it.

I am not tempted to be a celebrity, but it would be nice to think that my work had made a real difference to others – and yet, once we retire we quickly become yesterday’s men or women.

The reality is that most prayers for self are sinful – for sin is just a form of egoism, sin is putting me first. Whereas Jesus said: **“Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well”** (Matt 6.33)

Q.: Is it wrong to pray for self? Is personal ambition ever right? Is part of the difficulty of prayer that we do not really want what we feel we should be praying for?

For reflection: “None of us will achieve all that we set out to do so. Solomon’s prayer, however, is a worthy and challenging reminder that we shall not achieve anything worthwhile at all if we do not set some clear priority for ourselves” (RE Clements).