

**Solomon's Wisdom || 1 Kings 3:3-14**  
**Rev. Drew Hanson || October 28, 2018**

**Introduction**

The summer after I graduated college was an interesting one. I had just graduated with a degree in biology but knew I actually felt called to be a pastor. So I was going to spend the summer reading and studying and applying to Seminary. In the meantime I would volunteer with the youth group at my home church. Get a taste of ministry. Unfortunately, it was also a time where I needed a minor surgery. After the surgery, I actually felt relatively good. Once the grogginess of surgery wore off, I wasn't in too much pain and I felt good. Before the wound healed, I got a call from a friend who worked at a Christian children's camp, and they needed someone to come and be a counselor for a week for a group of boys whose counselor couldn't make it at the last second. I'd have to be at the camp the next morning. Earlier that week, I had either heard a sermon or had read in the gospels the account of Jesus calling his disciples when they dropped their nets and followed him without question. When I got that call from a friend, I thought to myself, this is my net moment. I've got to go without question. I'll be there. That week was one of the most miserable of my life. I felt incredibly lonely, as I was the only counselor for this group and there is not adult time. And, the next week, I had to go back to the doctor because my surgical wound had become infected. That resulted in a second, slightly more invasive surgery and a more painful recovery. And that one didn't work, so I had to have a third, much more invasive surgery and

moments of excruciating pain during recovery. This week as I asked Cassie if that story would be a good one for this sermon, she said, yeah that wasn't very wise. Wisdom begins with obedience to God, and continues as we listen to God. I didn't stop to listen and assumed I knew the right thing to do, without stopping and considering the likely outcomes to going to this camp. This morning, we are speaking on wisdom. To do so, we will think about Solomon and his wisdom.

## **Solomon's Dream**

Here's the thing about Solomon: his wisdom was and is legendary. 1 Kings 4:29-34 says this of the king, "God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, children of Mahol; his fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations. He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish. People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom." That is legendary. Even Jesus spoke of how wise Solomon was when he told the Pharisees that something greater than Solomon was here. This was an

inflammatory statement because who could be greater than Solomon? Especially in wisdom.

But where did Solomon get this wisdom? Perhaps he was just born with it. Or, because he was King David's son, he was given the best education possible in Israel. This morning, our text shows us that it's not any of those things. In fact, Solomon had very little to do with his own wisdom. Solomon's wisdom is a gift from God.

I say it has very little to do with Solomon and not nothing to do with Solomon because Solomon does have a part to play, and this is where we are all invited into this story. We have a part to play in our stories, but God has the biggest part. First it says that Solomon loved the Lord. We have to start there. We have to love God to the point where we want to do God's will above our own. For God's will to become our will. Then, Solomon asks for wisdom. God comes to Solomon in a dream shortly after he becomes King. Solomon is worried that he is not old enough to be king. And God says to him, "Ask what I should give you." Solomon goes on for a bit about how great God is, how God was faithful to David, and how maybe he's not ready to be king. At the end of this, he says this to God in the dream, "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil"

This pleases God, and God says, Solomon, you could have asked for wealth, you could have asked for me to hand over your enemies to you, but you asked for wisdom. You asked for discernment. You asked for help in governing and providing

justice for your people. Because you've asked for this and not wealth or power, I'm going to give you all three. We can learn from Solomon. If God came to you in a dream and said, "Ask what I should give you," what would you say? To win that billion dollar lottery ticket? A better-paying job or a job where you are happy and fulfilled? Take away debt? World peace? For the Padres to finally win a world series? What - who said that? Would you ask for wisdom like Solomon does?

### **God proves to us that Solomon received the Wisdom**

Solomon wakes from his dream, and he is immediately confronted with a very difficult case to judge. Kings were the top judges, and legal cases came to them for ultimate judgement. When Solomon asks God for wisdom to govern GOD's people, the word there for govern is to judge. So immediately Solomon's newly received wisdom is put to the test. This story, and especially Solomon's judgment, is bizarre for 21st century ears. So be aware of that. Two women come to him. These women live in the same house and are unmarried. They both become pregnant, and give birth three days apart. The claim of the first woman is that the woman who gave birth second, her baby died in the middle of the night and swapped babies in the middle of the night, so the first woman woke up to find a dead child next to her. Both women appear in front of Solomon claiming that the living child is theirs. There are no witnesses. So what does Solomon do? Wisdom is surely needed here.

Solomon says this - and this is where it gets really bizarre for 21st century ears, so be aware of that - "Bring me a sword, divide the boy in two, give one half to each woman." Ok, that doesn't sound so wise. But it causes the two mothers to stop arguing and their true colors show. The first woman says, "Please, my lord, give her the living baby; certainly do not kill him." I'll stop arguing so that they child can live. But the second woman seems to shrug and say "If this is what the king wants, so be it." Solomon has heard enough, and says give the first woman the child and do not kill him. She is the mother.

This story of Solomon's judgment, and other stories like it, make him famous. He becomes the wisest, richest, and most powerful kings in Israel's history and brings Israel to the world stage in terms of powerful kingdoms of his day around the known world. This is done by God. God created a foundation for the kingdom under David, who united the tribes and made Jerusalem the capital. God also granted Solomon his wisdom.

Solomon's wisdom was not just shown here in this story, but throughout his life and perhaps more importantly, in his writing. The books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs, as well as a few psalms were ascribed to Solomon. Here's one of his proverbs: one of the wisest people ever speaking about wisdom, he says this in Proverbs 9:10: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight." There is no true wisdom outside of God. Solomon learned that as a young king when he asked God to grant him wisdom, and God did. But now, Solomon goes back to God and

says that the fear of the Lord, an Old Testament saying that many interpret as obedience and worship, is the true beginning of wisdom. Obeying God is wise and leads to wisdom, disobeying God is unwise and leads to foolishness.

### **Solomon's Wisdom is still limited**

Unfortunately, Solomon is a cautionary tale. He asks God for wisdom in discerning how to govern. That word for govern is also translated as judgment or administering justice. After some time, though, he loses the focus on justice and slips into oppressing others. After Solomon dies, 1 Kings 12 tells us that many in the kingdom complained about Solomon's yoke being too heavy, in other words he was working his people too hard. Solomon's son Rehoboam becomes king and says he will make the yoke even heavier. This leads to a split in the kingdom, Judah in the south and Israel in the north. Solomon's wisdom in governing wears out, and he oppresses his people. He does the opposite of what he asked God for at the beginning of his reign: he no longer sought how to discern how to truly administer justice. He no longer feared God, he no longer obeyed or properly worshiped God. Scripture tells us it was his 700 wives that led him astray, as many of them were foreign princesses who worshiped other gods. They led Solomon away from true worship as he would sacrifice and pray to all sorts of other gods. Obedience leads to wisdom; disobedience leads to foolishness.

## **Stewardship**

We may not be kings of a great nation, as Solomon was. But, we are all stewards of something. Solomon asks God for wisdom to govern a mighty people, maybe we need to ask God for wisdom to be a good parent. Maybe we need to ask God for wisdom in how we spend and manage money. Maybe we need to ask God for wisdom in how to care for this building or our neighborhood or our city or our region. Maybe we need to ask God for wisdom for how to discern good from evil in whatever we govern. We don't govern a nation like Solomon, but we govern our money, our time, our energy, our rest.

God has given each of us something. Relationships. Time. Money. Gifts and talents. A body. A church, both the people around you that make up a church and the building itself. God gives us these gifts. And we are called to look at all of these things the way Solomon first looked at the people he was about to rule, at his kingdom. He could have asked God for wealth, he could have asked for greater power. He asks for wisdom. He asks for sound judgment. He asks God to discern how best to govern that which God has given him. Can we do the same? Can we ask God genuinely how to best govern the money, time, and gifts God has given us?

## **Conclusion**

Here's the difficult part in sharing with you this camp counselor story. I regret going, but I don't think it was wrong. Let me see if I

can untangle this. I don't think it was wrong, as I spent a week sharing the love of Christ with kids who needed to hear it, it gave me valuable lessons and experience for ministry, it gave me perspective on some differences that we Christians have in our faith as other counselors were brought up in a very different brand of Christianity than I had been. So I have a hard time saying it was wrong, but clearly after reflecting, the decision to go was unwise to the point of foolishness. I did not stop and ask for wisdom in discerning if I should go or not. I did not take into account my stewardship of my own body.

No matter how much we desire it, we don't live in a world with a lot of black-and-white decisions. Rarely is there a binary "This is right" and "This is wrong" decision. We need to take Solomon's example and request wisdom from God. Wisdom helps us navigate the gray area decisions of life. We'll never be as wise as Solomon. But we can continually ask God for wisdom. God will grant us wisdom, but then we need to be good stewards of wisdom. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. God will grant us wisdom, but we need to obey God in order to keep and grow that wisdom.

Obedience and wisdom go hand-in-hand. Obeying God is wise and leads to wisdom. Wisdom tells us that obeying God is always the best thing to do.



## Postscript

So, as I was finalizing this sermon and spent the week studying wisdom, you can imagine my disgust when I heard the news that a synagogue was attacked in Pittsburgh on Friday night. As a pastor, the violence we've seen in peaceful houses of worship break my heart. And it speaks to a great foolishness that some people think is wisdom. Sometimes the 'wisdom' of the some leads us to love those who look or think like us and hate the other. Sometimes the 'wisdom' of the some says that one more act of violence will solve something. Sometimes unwise words said by some people lead other people to act out hatefully and violently.

The wisdom that is from God is so *starkly* different.

You know what God's wisdom looks like? **[Point at cross.]**

It looks like the cross. It looks like a Roman execution device that Jesus transformed into a symbol of peace. In 1 Corinthians, Paul says God did something that the world's wisdom would deem foolishness and therefore we proclaim Christ crucified first and always. Jesus faced hate and violence and instead of perpetuating it he accepted it. He takes it on himself so that we are given the opportunity to experience true peace. As Dr. King said in that 1957 sermon, hate does not cast out hate, only love does that. As followers of the crucified one, we are cannot perpetuate hate, fear, and violence. Those things beget more of the same, they don't solve anything. Taking up our cross daily and following Jesus means dedicating ourselves to be obedient to God so that we receive wisdom. Godly wisdom looks at the wheel of hate and violence and sticks love in the spokes. Let's be a church that continuously turns to God and asks for wisdom.