

WHAT WILL YOU ASK?

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Text: I Kings 3:5-14

SCRIPTURE

At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. 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. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. 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?" 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; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

The Word of the Lord... Thanks be to God!

SERMON

A few weeks ago, I heard a story about two men discussing the recent renovations one had done in his kitchen. They were talking about his new stainless steel appliances. The new owner said he liked them, went on about how efficient they were and how he liked the way they look. "There is just one thing," he said, "Magnets don't stick to stainless steel. We have a bunch of refrigerator magnets and we were always sticking things up there, from a shopping list to the kids' artwork to vacation post cards. They don't work anymore." The two were discussing why this was the case, because after all, steel is made from iron, when one man's 10-year-old daughter spoke up. "Dad, the reason magnets do not stick to the refrigerator is that stainless steel has a very high nickel content, which is not magnetic."

Now, how do you suppose she knew that when her father and his friend did not? She "Googled" it, of course. She was playing with her iPad while the men were talking and simply typed in the question and got her answer. The way we go about finding answers to our questions has radically changed over the last few years. Many of us are of an age that can remember going to the library and looking through the card catalog, which had actual paper cards, to find a particular book where we hoped we would find the answer we were looking for. Some of us can remember using the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* to find magazine articles on a particular topic. Sometimes we even had to ask the librarian to help us find the information.

That has all changed. Now, you turn on your iPad or open your laptop and most of the information you are looking for is at your fingertips. Of course, you don't even have to type anything anymore. If you have a smart phone or some sort of similar device, you just have to ask your question and get your answer. I have an Amazon Tap, which is a portable Bluetooth and Wi-Fi speaker. I mostly use it to play music, but it can do much more. Alexa is the name of the digital assistant who is ready to answer my questions. I can ask her about the weather, and the correct time in Tokyo, Japan. I can ask her the score of yesterday's Cub's game. The previous church I served was in Webster, NY, so I can ask Alexa the distance between Marion, IA and Webster:

724 miles as the crow flies. But I can also ask more abstract questions. Which came first, the chicken or the egg? *According to Neil Degrasse Tyson the egg came first. He's pretty smart so I tend to believe him.* Or perhaps: How many roads must a man walk down? *The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind.* Alexa has a sense of humor, kind of; Who's on first? *That's what I keep trying to tell you.* Whose on first and Whats on second. She can be somewhat romantic; Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo? *Deny thy father and refuse thy name. Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, And I'll no longer be a Capulet.* But you really can't get too personal with Alexa; Do you love me? *There are many people that I admire, and things I can't do without, but I have yet to figure out this human thing called love.* And you cannot get answers to the most important questions. Alexa, what is the difference between good and evil? *I don't know the answer to that.* Is there life after death? *I don't know that.* Is there a God? *Many people have different views on religion.* Some sort of digital assistant can be helpful with a lot of information, but that is their basic limitation. All you get is information. You still have to do something with that information in order to come to any sort of conclusion. They can provide facts but just facts are not the same as really knowing the answer. They can provide knowledge, but that knowledge is not the same as wisdom.

Our scripture lesson this morning is about Solomon, a king of ancient Israel who was renowned for his wisdom. He had more than facts, more than information, more than just the answers. He was wise and our text tells us how he acquired such wisdom. I want to get into what exactly went on in just a moment, but first I want to give you a little background. If you read everything the Bible says about King Solomon, you will discover a rather mixed up story. It is almost as if it was first written by those who belonged to one political party and then someone belonging to the opposition did the final editing before it went to press. We see this in the verses right before our text. In 1 Kings 3:3 it says, "Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only he sacrificed and offered incense in the high places. The "high places" were mountain tops sacred to the pagan gods of the non-Jewish people in the area. So the pro-Solomon writer says that he loved the one true God and followed his father David's example. The anti-Solomon editor makes the snide comment implying that he was involved in pagan rituals. It sounds a lot like Washington today, doesn't it? Things don't really change much over thousands of years, now do they?

This background is important when you study our scripture lesson, because when you look at the overall picture you realize that Solomon never really crushed his opponents. Throughout his life, and for long afterwards, there were those who did not think he was the rightful king. They say that history is written by the winners. If that is true then it must be said that Solomon never completely won. If he had then the anti-Solomon party would not have been around to make all those malicious remarks about him.

With that in mind, let us look at the text, a conversation between God and Solomon shortly after Solomon is crowned king. It is a story that was definitely written by the pro-Solomon party, but even if it does have a particular slant, there is a lot here to teach us. At a place called Gibeon, God appears to Solomon in a dream and says, "Ask what I shall give you." This is far, far beyond any kind of digital assistance. This is divine assistance. God comes to Solomon and says, "I am here to help you, Solomon. What will you ask for?" It is rather mind blowing when you think about it. If God appeared to you and made that offer, how would you have responded? I suppose everyone would have a different answer. Some would ask for wealth, of course, and others to be strong and healthy. Some might ask for a relationship, or even to be with a special person they have lost. Maybe some would ask for talent or special skill. And the question, of course, is if God would give us exactly what we asked for, would that really make us happy? There are lots of stories about lottery winners who can go out and get anything they want but still end up miserable.

Now, you may have heard this story about Solomon before, maybe back when you were a kid in Sunday School. That is when I first heard it. If you asked me what Solomon asked for, I would have quickly answered wisdom. He wanted to be clever and quick, maybe even a little cunning. He wanted to be able to outthink his opponents. He wanted to keep everything under control, and he knew it was going to take more than brute force.

But when you carefully read the text you discover that is not quite the case. We have a lot of flowery language as if Solomon is trying to talk God into going along with his request. But he finally gets to the point and says in verse 9: “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?”

Did you catch that? He does not actually ask for wisdom. He asks for an “understanding mind... able to discern between good and evil...” That phrase intrigued me when I read it. What exactly is an understanding mind that can discern between good and evil? So I went digging and what I discovered was very interesting. The two words “understanding mind” is not an entirely accurate translation. In the Hebrew, what Solomon literally asks for is a “listening heart.” He is not asking for some sort of intellectual enhancement. It is not about mental prowess, being so smart and knowing all the answers. Solomon is asking to be able to connect to his people on a deeply emotional level, to hear more than words, to hear their sorrows and frustrations as well as their hopes and dreams. Give me a listening heart, he prays, so that I can connect with others on a meaningful personal level.

It is an amazing request when you stop and think about it. As God says in his reply to Solomon, he could have asked for military and political power, to sweep away his enemies once and for all, and ensure that he would have been in control for the rest of his life. He could have asked for economic power, because after all, if you have that political power will follow. He could have asked for fame, for pleasure, for personal peace and contentment, for all sorts of things. But he asks for a listening heart that knows what is right and what is wrong. There is so much that could be said about this, but when I read these verses I was reminded of another story all the way back at the beginning. Solomon wants to be able to discern between good and evil. In the opening chapters of Genesis, the first human beings are placed in the garden and are told they are not to eat the fruit on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you remember the story, the serpent appears to the man and woman and urges them to eat that forbidden fruit, telling them that if they do their eyes will be opened and they will be like God knowing good from evil.

Now, at first glance you might be inclined to think that these first humans want the same thing as Solomon. Why was what they did so wrong? They just want to know what is good and what is evil, what is right and what is wrong. That’s the same thing, isn’t it? Well, no, not at all.

If you were here last week, you might recall I mentioned this story about Adam and Eve. I talked about what the Hebrews meant when they referred to sin. I said that the Hebrew word for “sin” was actually a term from archery and it meant missing the mark, or not hitting what you were aiming for. That is the key to understanding the difference between what Solomon is asking for and what the first humans did that was so wrong. The difference is what they were aiming for.

Solomon wanted a listening heart that would discern between good and evil, so that he could effectively lead God’s people. Adam and Eve wanted to know the difference between good and evil so that they could be like God. Solomon’s focus was upward and outward. It was connecting with others and connecting to God. His aim was to be in the right relationship with God and with others. He hit the mark. The first humans were focusing on themselves. They were suspicious of what God might be doing, why God was restricting their freedom. Their aim was to get more for themselves, to be more powerful, to be like God. They missed the mark.

God was pleased with what Solomon asked for, and when God replies to Solomon, wisdom is finally mentioned. God says, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies... *Because your aim was not to get more for yourself, not what would be beneficial to you...* 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.” Literally it says “I give you a wise heart that is able to discern.” God gave Solomon what he asked for and much, much more.

This story of Solomon is a lesson on true wisdom. It is also a lesson on prayer. It is tempting sometimes to think of prayer as some sort of heavenly digital assistant, like Alexa on my Amazon Tap or Siri on your iPhone. If I make sure I have a good Wi-Fi connection and ask the question in the right way Alexa will give me the answer I want. If I am a good person, go to church, put a twenty in the offering plate, and use the right words when I pray, God will give me the answer I want. It doesn't work that way. In James 4:2&3 it says, "You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures."

The big question, of course, is how to ask God for the right things? Perhaps that is what being a disciple of Christ is all about, learning how to ask God for the right things. There are probably many ways to do this, but I think a good place to start would be to ask for a listening heart. Certainly our Lord Jesus had a listening heart and we should strive to be like him.

So what will you ask? Let us ask for true wisdom, a listening heart. Lord, give me a listening heart; a listening heart for you, and a listening heart for those closest to me, my family, my friends, and all those I love. Lord, give me a listening heart for those in my church, and those at school and at work. Give me a listening heart for those who are dependent on me, who look up to me, who need me in some way. Give me a listening heart for the strangers I encounter, for those who at times frighten me, for those who I often overlook and ignore. Lord, give me a listening heart for those who are hurting, for the hungry, the lonely, the confused and the angry. Give me a listening heart for those of other faiths, or no faith at all, for the refugee, the immigrant, those who are homeless, those who are addicted. Lord God, give me a listening heart for all who need to be listened to. A prayer like that comes about as close as you can to hitting the mark. If you ask God for something like that, I am sure you will get an answer. That is asking for the right thing. That is hitting the mark. That is being truly wise. May God help us to be wise. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.