

1 Kings 3:4-15

The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar.

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." Then Solomon awoke; it had been a dream. He came to Jerusalem where he stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. He offered up burnt offerings and offerings of well-being, and provided a feast for all his servants.

Wise Leadership - July 26, 2020

1 Kings 3:4-15

I imagine that when you heard today's scripture about Solomon having a dream in which he asked God for the gift of wisdom to govern his people, you might have understandably thought that this was going to be sermon about the lack of wisdom and the lack of leadership coming from the highest levels of our government. Yes, it is both shocking and saddening that virtually all the nations we compare ourselves with have gotten the pandemic under some control, with infection rates and deaths down dramatically. We know they followed the advice of the scientists mandated masks and reopened properly across their countries instead of allowing each region to figure out its own policy. We know that their citizens did their patriotic duty and wore masks not just to benefit themselves, but to benefit everyone around them. Most of our peer nations were able to take care of workers who were laid off, many of whom are back and work and nobody had to worry about paying for tests or, if needed, hospitalizations. In other words, we have plenty of examples of effective leadership that prevented illness and saved lives — leadership that is sorely lacking here.

But as you know, all the sermons in the world are not going to change the current situation. We all know the only remedy that will. I don't need to waste our time today complaining about the overall lack of wisdom from so many officials, as this scripture might lead me to do.

The fact is that in our lives, all of us will have the opportunity and responsibility to lead. Whether it is leading our families, leading a committee or team, or leading a business or organization, there will be times in our lives where the mantle of leadership falls on us and we will have to make decisions that could profoundly affect others — sometimes a few, sometimes hundreds or thousands.

When we hear the word "leader" it is easy to think about presidents, kings, or generals. But life has a way of putting each one of us into the role of decision maker at some point or another, whether we are prepared for it or not. Perhaps we are at a hospital and have to make a sudden decision about a loved one's treatment. If we are parents, we must lead our children in the process of growing up and becoming responsible for their lives — a process we all know is met with varying degrees of resistance. We may have to decide about hiring or releasing people from work. We might have to decide the future direction for our business or organization. The challenges of leadership, in short, are everywhere and the decisions of Solomon are a helpful guide for us all.

Let's start with the basics. Who was Solomon? We might have heard the phrase "Wisdom of Solomon" or be familiar with the story of Solomon deciding about who the mother of a baby was when two women brought their dispute to him. But where did this guy come from in the first place?

Solomon was a son of King David. Yes, that David, the ancestor of Jesus, the one that Michelangelo made a statue of, easily the most popular king of Israel ever. Now Solomon was the son of David and Bathsheba. You might recall that Bathsheba was a woman David basically kidnapped and raped when he saw her bathing on her rooftop. When Bathsheba told David she was pregnant, David had Bathsheba's husband Uriah killed during a battle. The first child of David and Bathsheba died, but then she became the mother of a second child who was Solomon. David had quite a few sons and toward the end of his life, his first born son, Absalom, betrayed him and tried to overthrow his father David. Absalom was captured and killed, and through a lot of palace intrigue, Solomon was named David's successor. Interestingly, before he died, David advised Solomon to kill many of David's friends and advisors who had kept David in power over the years and Solomon did so.

Solomon begins his rule fully aware of the circumstances under which he became king and having killed many of his father's advisers. Certainly an interesting way to begin ruling Israel.

But the story of Solomon's ascension to the throne is full of lessons for us. As I said before, we are all in positions of leadership. We attain leadership sometimes by seeking it; sometimes accidentally. In Solomon's case, it was a bit of both. But for us, our main task as leaders is to never forget why we are leading and how we got the leadership role. It makes no difference whether you are the head of a household or the CEO of a corporation, you are expected to lead, to make decisions, to persuade others of your views. However, our being aware of the events which brought us to leadership is essential for us to be wise leaders. Too often leaders at all levels persuade themselves that they are leaders solely through their own efforts. It doesn't matter what level of leader you are, from a heading your family, to a chairing a committee, to a being CEO of company, to a being in charge of government. You are leading due to a combination of circumstances you do not necessarily control.

I love the line from Shakespeare's play Twelfth Night, "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em. Thy Fates open their hands. Let thy blood and spirit embrace them." Whether you are born into a position of authority, or earn it through hard work, or unexpectedly find yourself leading and rise to the occasion, we cannot forget how we got there. So many people, usually the children of the wealthy and famous, inherit their positions. This is painfully true in the church world where we are seeing the second or third generation of certain churches and organizations take over from their parents. Unlike their parents, they did not have to go through the process of struggle and doubt and overcoming many obstacles to build the church, they simply walked into it as if it were always theirs. Personally, I can think of few examples of the children of the rich and famous outshining their parents. They forget that they were given their power and did not work for it. Some say the Boomers, such as myself, have an attitude of entitlement toward life

because our parents who grew up during the Great Depression and World War II had a hard childhood and were determined to make our lives easier. Perhaps. But leaders who were handed their jobs do well to remember that they did nothing to earn their jobs — knowledge which should, but seldom does — make them humble. Like Solomon.

Shakespeare said some achieve greatness. Yes, those are the ones who through hard work have achieved positions of leadership. We are certainly acquainted with many people, from the rich and famous to members of our own families, who got where they are because they put in the time and effort and sacrifice to get where they got. We Americans are particularly fond of singling out such people and holding them up as role models. People ranging from President Lincoln, the son of an illiterate farmer, to the late congressman John Lewis, son of a sharecropper, were people who were not expected to succeed or get very far in life. However, they worked hard, suffered many setbacks, yet achieved great things in their lives. But for both Lincoln and Lewis, they never forgot where they came from. They never forgot their backgrounds. Most importantly, they never forgot that they did not achieve their positions of leadership alone, there were many people to guide and help them along the way. Despite it being part of American mythology, there is no such thing as a self-made man or woman. We are well served to constantly reflect on the fact that we all are just partially a product of our choices and hard work, but also because of the many, many, many people who have helped us along the way — most of whom we will never know. Solomon was not supposed to be King. He had half brothers who were older. Scripture tells us that his mother Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan worked together to get David to name Solomon his successor. Did he remember that little fact?

Finally, Shakespeare reminds us that some people have greatness thrust upon them. There are many leaders who did not seek positions of leadership. How many families do we know where one partner dies and mothers and, yes, fathers are suddenly in charge of everything. Becoming a single parent brings all kinds of challenges and the need to master new skills. Most do and become great parents. You may be watching the Netflix series, The Crown, about the story of Queen Elizabeth II. Throughout the series, Elizabeth, even after attaining the respect and admiration of the world, constantly questions herself and her qualifications. She never forgets that her father, King George VI was not supposed to be king, but only became so when George's brother, King Edward VIII abdicated. Moreover, George VI died at an early age so Elizabeth became queen at the age of 26. Greatness was thrust upon her, as she continues to perform a totally dreadful job that proves wealth and fame are hardly everything. There is little question that Solomon was not really trained to be king as a child, but only got the nod much later. When he has a dream about being king, he tells God he feels like a little child, hardly knowing what to do.

Now today's scripture tells us the best decision Solomon ever made as king. We are told the story of Solomon's dream, where he meets God and when asked by God for whatever he wanted, Solomon asked for the ability to rule his people wisely. God was pleased by this request and told Solomon that he would receive not only wisdom, but also wealth and honor. Great choice, Solomon.

But God adds one little caveat. God tells Solomon, "If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life." There we go. That troublesome little word, if.

And this is where leadership so often falls apart. Not just for Solomon, but for all of us who have been a position to lead anything.

The first requirement of any leader is to remember is that the source of all leadership is God. We imperil ourselves, but we especially imperil those whom we are supposed to be leading, when we forget that we absolutely cannot be good and wise leaders without God's help.

The later story of Solomon goes on to illustrate this. God indeed gave Solomon wisdom. Traditionally the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon are attributed to him. God indeed gave Solomon wealth and honor. Under Solomon, the kingdom became powerful and wealthy. God honored God's side of the bargain.

But Solomon did as so many leaders do, so many leaders at all levels of society. Solomon did what even we do from time to time. Solomon forgot that the source of his leadership was God. He forgot the statutes and commandments of God. Solomon forgot that he was where he was because God put him there.

Friends, we are not kings and queens. But we are, each of us in our own way, leaders. Wise leadership can only work when we never forget our dependance on God. Otherwise, we will inevitably fail. Solomon forgot about God. He married hundreds of wives to advance his empire and allowed them to bring their own gods in. He raised taxes on his people and enslaved them to build his temple and other projects. Solomon's children had no sense of humility and when given the chance to lead, alienated the people, and caused the kingdom to have a civil war and be permanently split in two parts. Solomon, for all the promise at the beginning of his reign, forgot his God — our God — and everyone suffered because of it.

Every day in our own lives, in our own roles as leaders, we face the same choices. We can either forget where we came from and what brought us there and follow our own ideas. Or we can remember our complete reliance on God, who is always with us and never abandons us — as long as we never forget who we are and who God is.