

Pastor Kris Litman-Koon

Date: 18 August 2024

Lesson: 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14 / Ephesians 5:15-20

¹⁰Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David. ¹¹The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. ¹²So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established.

³Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. ⁴The 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. ⁵At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." ⁶And 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. ⁷And 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. ⁸And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. ⁹Give 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?" ¹⁰It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹God 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, ¹²I 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. ¹³I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. ¹⁴If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

There was a father who had a son who had just graduated from high school. Before the son set out on his own, they agreed to do a camping trip. So they loaded up their backpacks and began their trek into the woods. After a long day, they set up camp in a clearing. The son began to set up the tent while the dad prepared dinner over the campfire. After a hearty meal and some small talk around the fire, the two of them agreed it was time to hit the sack, so they doused the remains of the fire and prepared for bed. Lying in their sleeping bags, the father took a deep breath, and asked, "Son, what do you see?" The son responded, "A night full of stars."

“Okay,” the father says. “And what else?” “Those are stars from our own Milky Way galaxy, and some of them form constellations.” “And...” the father prods. “And the moon has a crescent shape, and the glow is on its right side. That means it’s in the waxing crescent phase, so we are about ten days away from a full moon.”

The father responded, “Okay. How is that useful?” “Well, for centuries, cultures around the world have used the constellations for navigation, and the rhythms of the stars and moon have been used for tracking seasonal changes here on Earth.”

“Yes, that’s right, son. But what can you infer from all this?” The father was obviously reaching for an ultimate point, so the son went deeper. “Tests have revealed that all of this – the whole universe – is expanding. And when the rate of expansion is calculated and worked backwards, it tells us that roughly 13.7 billion years ago everything was at a single point of space and time, called The Big Bang Singularity...”

“I know that, son,” the father interrupted, “but...”

“But what, Dad?!? What are you getting at?”

“I’ve been trying to point out that you forgot to put the rain cover on the tent.”

Intelligence and wisdom are not opposed to each other, but that story picks up on the subtleties between them. Often they work together, yet the distinction between intellect and wisdom is important. Intelligence points to our capacity to learn, and wisdom points to life experience and insights into human nature. The son did great at connecting all that he had learned about astronomy, but the father – likely only through experience – knew that they would need that rain cover.

Today’s 1 Kings passage definitely points to the value of wisdom. The passage says that King David ruled for 40 years at the time of his death. Then there was a peaceful transfer of power to his son Solomon, and “his rule was firmly established.” Easy-peasy lemon squeezy, right? Not so fast. Note that the lesson begins with verses 10 to 12 of chapter 2, and then it skips to chapter 3 verse 3. 36 verses were skipped over, during which Solomon’s half-brother Adonijah saw his father David’s failing health and he declared himself the king. The prophet Nathan and the wife Bathsheba

confronted David about the situation, and this coup attempt was put to an end quickly. Adonijah pleaded with Solomon to spare his life, who did... this time. After today's story, Adonijah asked Solomon to have in marriage a woman who served their father David on his deathbed. Somehow Solomon interpreted this as a coy move to steal the throne, so Solomon had his brother Adonijah killed. That kind of sours the story a bit, eh? Well, today's lesson includes David's death, so maybe he had some parting words that could lighten the mood a little. Indeed, David has a deathbed speech that ends right before our lesson today picks up. So what does David say in the final two verses of this speech, the culmination of 40 years on the throne? David says there is a man named Shimei who did him wrong, yet David swore to God that he wouldn't kill Shimei. So, knowing that he will soon die, the final recorded words of the great King David are these instructions for his son Solomon; "you must bring [Shimei's] gray head down with blood." David's final words are retribution served by a loophole.

Why share all this? Why get into the messy parts of David's and Solomon's lives. It's because too often discussions about them – which normally happen in kids' Sunday School classrooms – sanitize the stories. Too often that is all we've ever been taught about these guys, leaving us thinking there is nothing problematic about these figures. Have you ever thought about why these questionable passages about kings are included in scripture? It's because there was a long debate in Israel and Judah about whether they should have kings at all, because God was supposed to be their king. Although the people ultimately had kings, the debate was never settled on whether that was a good thing. The writers of these stories intentionally shared abhorrent aspects of the monarchy to remind us that human rulers come with serious flaws.

What then should we expect from human rulers? Only poor judgment and acts of revenge? No. But starting with today's story, the people begin to expect that their king will embody wisdom, even if they have other flaws. Why then is God pleased with Solomon when he chooses wisdom as a gift? It's because Solomon could have chosen anything that elevated his personal status: fortune, long life, military might. Choosing wisdom, however, shows that Solomon understands the purpose of kingly succession is not for his own self-promotion. Rather, choosing wisdom shows that Solomon sees the kingly succession as the vehicle for Israel's collective continuance. That's what

God wanted all along: the people's continuance. As flawed as Solomon may be, his priority is not for his own wealth and status. His concern is for the welfare of the people.

So how are you and I supposed to apply this story of Solomon to our lives? First, we have to recognize that no one is going to become wise during the span of one sermon. Wisdom is a lifelong pursuit. Second, when this story took place, it was the same era as when the books of wisdom – Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and many of the psalms – were written. Wisdom becomes the defining characteristic for any individual, whether a king or a commoner. The message is pursue wisdom, enjoy life, trust in God, and love other people. Third, when I just said that Solomon's priority was the welfare of the people, not his own wealth or status, does that sound familiar? It sounds like Jesus. Just as important, however, is that Jesus embodied the wisdom of God. Jesus refused the temptations of wealth and status. He instead chose a path that prioritizes the welfare of all people. In John's gospel, when it says that Jesus is the "Word of God," that's effectively saying that Jesus is the embodiment of God's wisdom. It means the will, the heart, the essence, the wisdom of the One who created it all. All things came into being through this Word. If we are pursuing wisdom, we should look to how Jesus' ministry lives out God's wisdom. Also, we should recognize when other voices in our lives work against that wisdom. We need to be keenly aware of when voices tell us to prioritize wealth and status; when they tell us to fear and hate other people, rather than seek out what is best for them. Which gets us to our fourth and final point. Did you notice that our Ephesians lesson is also about wisdom? It says to not live as unwise people, but as wise. And in what seems like a strange shift, it says don't get drunk but sing hymns. A prevailing theory about the letter to Ephesians is that it is a compilation of sorts of homilies that were given to people who were preparing for baptism. In that case, this passage can be understood in two ways. One, don't expect Christian worship to look like Roman expressions of worshiping their gods. Second, it is the same wisdom that is still shared to this day: if you are seeking to fill a hole in your life, alcohol, drugs, greed, and anything else will not fill it. What can, however, is coming together in a supportive network and allowing something greater to fill us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.