

A prayer for wisdom

We are familiar with varied leadership styles and studying those who have impacted our world of corporations, politics, and management dynamics.



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In the current political climate we can study both candidates and voters to contrast rhetoric, vision, and structure in order to understand both negative and positive possibilities for our future. We think our culture is vastly different from Solomon's day, but the human heart and mind are not much changed.

Our lesson begins with the transition of leadership in ancient Israel from David to his son Solomon. Saul was Israel's first king, the result of human desire, followed by David, who was God's choice, a man of possibilities and flaws (1 Samuel 8).

The saga around David and Solomon would make a fascinating and sordid television series today. David had drifted into senility by the end of his life. Solomon was his son by Bathsheba, the woman whose husband's death was arranged by David (II Samuel 11:1-12:24). Although David had named Solomon as his successor, another son, Adonijah, tried to seize control. This was not the first attempt to overthrow David.

Bathsheba joined Nathan, prophet and friend of David, in urging David to formally name Solomon as the next king. It seems David emerged briefly from his last illness, perhaps reflecting on his own failures over forty years, to tell Solomon that his life will only be good and worthwhile if he walks in God's ways and keeps God's laws. David also reminds Solomon of God's promise: "If your children will take care to walk before me faithfully, with all their heart and all of their being, then one of your children will never fail to be on the throne of Israel" (1 Kings 2:4).

Ancient cultures commonly connected a king's success with the favor of their gods, but Israel's heritage reached beyond the simple concept of "rewards for sacrifice and good behavior" to the God who is gracious as well as powerful. A hint of this appears in the phrasing of relating to God "with

all their heart and all their being," meaning with all that is within a person. This goes beyond ritual and obligation to relationship with God!

Significant dreams often shape events in God's dealing with us. Remember Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 37:5-19; 41:1-57) and Mary and Joseph in Nazareth (Lk. 1:26-35; Matt. 1:19-24). Immediately after David's death, Solomon ordered the death of several people who had plotted to seize control. He also signed a treaty with Egypt, considered a superpower, and sealed it by marrying one of Pharaoh's daughters, a common practice.

Having taken necessary steps to protect himself politically, Solomon went to worship God at Gibeon. God appeared to Solomon in a dream, promising, "Ask whatever you wish, and I'll give it to you" (1 Kings 3:5).

We may wonder how much Solomon's visit to this high altar at Gibeon was political, but his dream reveals a remarkable understanding that God will be primary in all he seeks to accomplish. If David's tenure was marked by wars and plots, Solomon's would be known for the building of the Temple, making Jerusalem a significant capital, and bringing Israel to economic importance.

In his prayer, Solomon praises God for his blessings on David, acknowledges his kingship is God's gift, and confesses his weakness and inexperience. Solomon repeatedly refers to himself as God's servant and makes his first request: "Please give your servant a discerning mind in order to govern your people and distinguish good from evil, because no one is able to govern this important people of yours without your help" (3:9). I'm surprised someone hasn't fixated on this particular prayer to write the definitive book on how a politician can pray and be guaranteed God's blessings.

Solomon must have learned from David's mistakes. In his prayer he pushed aside all the usual preferred benefits of being king and God gave Solomon more than he imagined. This king will be known for his wisdom, his court will be wealthy, his nation successful and respected, and his fame widespread. God concludes his promises to Solomon with a repeated caution: "If you walk in my ways and obey my laws and commands,

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just as your father David did, then I will give you a very long life" (3:14). God kept his promise, but Solomon faced some heartaches and left a flawed legacy resulting from numerous political wives, the false security of prosperity, and the resultant encroachment of pagan religions in Israel.

Wisdom, not to be confused with success or fame, comes to us as we love God and seek to serve him in the daily challenges of this world. Solomon used the word "servant" in his prayer and that word occurs frequently in the teachings of Jesus: "Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant ... your slave ... just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:26-28).

Your life is shaped by many influences, family environment, education, health, circumstances, and personal choices. Solomon chose to be a different kind of king than David. He carried the baggage and dangers left over from David's reign and the expectations of a flawed world. But Solomon chose a different way that reminds us by God's love and grace we can accomplish good in our world. As followers of Christ we can pray and seek to be an instrument of God's grace.

Solomon asked for a "discerning mind." This idea includes desire, hard work, determination, and making good choices all along the way. Solomon was not perfect, neither are you. But you are shaped by what you know in the truth of God's love, what is clearly presented in Jesus Christ. Easter has just reminded us that even death cannot stop the grace of God, that we become a new creation by Jesus' death and resurrection. Solomon reminds us that beyond the burdens of the past and the responsibilities of the present is the promise that God is with us offering his power and love to make a difference in our world.

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.