

## **“Insight into Leadership and Personal Choices”**

**1 Kings 2:10–12; 3:3-14**

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In working with couples preparing for marriage, I have always included an ultimate values instrument I developed years ago which includes questions about religious things but also about practical, everyday things like where we most want to live, how many children we want to have in an ideal world, and how we are going to handle money. Couples answer the questions separately and then compare their answers. The last question is this – if you could have one wish granted for your life together, what would it be? And no cheating, no Pauline, run-on sentences with twelve things included - you only get one wish!

It’s not an easy thing to do, it’s like picking one favorite hymn or scripture verse. It’s like finding a genie in a bottle, but someone has already taken the first two wishes. It’s a bit artificial and perhaps unfair, but the purpose is to push us to ponder what we value most, trusting that shared core values benefit marriage. Is it financial stability we long for, contentment, good health, freedom for both individuals to grow, a deeper sense of connection over time, spiritual maturity? All these things matter, but if we only get one wish, what will it be?

In our reading from 1 Kings, Solomon is presented with a question like this, and it is asked by God, which makes it even weightier. King David has died, and his son has become king. Matters of succession are critical and often messy. The transfer of power can be contentious in any system or nation, but it is important that it happens, and as smoothly as possible. After some bumps, Solomon becomes king.

He makes a sacrifice at Gibeon, which is a complicated matter. Worship is to be offered only at Jerusalem, according to Deuteronomic thinking (Deuteronomy 12:5). The reference to making sacrifices and offering incense at the “high places” here, therefore, is not a compliment by the editor. But Gibeon is a place with a history of God’s presence

and power being revealed. It is the only Canaanite city that attempted to make peace with the Israelites (Joshua 9) and it is the site of the battle where God miraculously held the sun at a standstill while the Israelites fought against the Amorites (Joshua 10).

So, perhaps it should come as no surprise that God appears to Solomon in a dream at this location, saying, “Ask what I should give you.” In other words, “If you only get one wish for your realm, what will it be?”

Solomon first acknowledges all the grace God extended to David. He refers to his father’s faithfulness, righteousness, and uprightness of heart toward God, which may cause us to choke on the reading, given the transgressions we have read about the last two weeks. But in the big picture, David was pretty good. One scholar has noted that the critique of kings in the Hebrew canon is largely a critique of kingship. God never wanted the Israelites to have a king in the first place.

But all of this is history now. Solomon is king, he has been given one wish, he has noted God’s grace in the past, and then he expresses unusual humility for a king. He is young, he says, only a child, he does not know how to go out or come in, all of which sets the stage for his request. What does Solomon want most of all? An understanding mind or heart to govern God’s people, one able to discern between good and evil, “For who can govern God’s great people?” he says.

We speak often of the wisdom of Solomon. Here Solomon reveals great wisdom at an early age, recognizing that he needs help; and asking for an understanding heart and mind to govern well, in effect saying this is the most important quality he could have. Apparently, God agrees. The text says the Lord is pleased with Solomon’s request and thus pledges not only to grant his wish but to offer many other blessings too.

Solomon is not a perfect king. He has flaws, like all leaders, but he gets a lot right, and his heart is in the right place. From the very beginning, he seeks the best for his people, not self-promotion. He stands with and for people, not over them. And he realizes that he does not possess the throne but rather is a steward of it; his power and authority are temporary holdings entrusted to him by people and God. Lest he forget this, the reading closes with these words, “*If you will walk*

in my ways, keeping my statutes and commandments... then I will lengthen your life.”

It is nice to have a straightforward positive story after all the messy narratives we have considered, but what is the message for us? On one level, there is helpful insight into what to look for in leaders. Humility, a deep yearning for wisdom, an understanding of the nature of power and a healthy way to embrace it, a good heart, the ability to discern between good and evil. And it is assumed that such leaders exist.

It is easy to become cynical. I can't count the number of times I have heard people say something like, “Politicians are all corrupt. It's only a choice between your blankety blank and mine. Corporate leaders are all greedy and power hungry. None of them cares about the impact of their decisions.” And these claims have some basis in reality, often some connection to experience, but the word *all* renders them suspect.

There are good people in leadership who are there for the right reasons who ought not be lumped together with those who are not. I have known them personally, I have worked with them, they do exist. It's like what someone said when she was asked if she believed in female ministers. “Believe in them, shoot, I've seen some!”

There are leaders of substance and integrity. I've seen some, and the first thing we ought to look for in finding them is humility. Solomon realizes he doesn't know it all, partly because he is young, but mostly because no one knows it all. A genuinely wise person knows this, recognizes their limits, and as a result, is not only a lot more pleasant to be around, but is able to learn and grow throughout life, and be willing to find the strongest people possible to help them lead.

There is no more obnoxious combination of qualities than arrogance and ignorance. But we are all ignorant, by definition, simply lacking knowledge, about some things. So, if we are arrogant, we have the combination! Especially in higher levels of leadership, there is no way to be fully informed about every subject. Wise leaders recognize their limits and thus want strong people around them, leading with them.

After humility, we might look for this desire Solomon had, for an understanding mind to govern people. There is a great deal loaded into

these few words. It's not just about being smart or informed, though these are not bad qualities to seek in leadership. But it's also about seeking the heart and mind to be able to govern well. In other words, it's about putting the interests of the people first, not one's own desires.

This is where cynicism comes into play for many of us. Aren't leaders all in it for personal gain of some kind, power and prestige, specific outcomes for self and friends? Actually, no, perhaps many are, if not most, but not all. There are genuine public servants, people who want to make a difference through leadership.

The truth is you have to be a little crazy to pursue leadership in this time with all the hateful rhetoric, vitriolic personal attacks, and intense frustration that comes with trying to lead in a time of division. Spouses and other family members are included in the nastiness and have few ways to respond. Yet some endure this for good reasons. We will always need leaders. We should hope, pray, and work for good ones.

But while all this insight on leadership is helpful, there is another level of meaning in this story, another message for us, a more personal one. If we could have one wish granted for our lives, what would it be? What is more important to us than anything else, and what does this say about what or who we believe in most? It is in some ways an unfair question. How do we rank trust in God, love for family, and enough resources to meet our basic needs and the needs of those we love? These are all high priorities. But there is some benefit in pondering what we would choose, if push comes to shove, what matters most.

While some will undoubtedly say something like for my team to win the national championship or my portfolio to grow so that I can retire by the age of 50 or 40, more of us will say something like for my loved one who is dying to get well, for my children to be settled and happy, for my marriage to be stronger, for my relationship with a loved one to be reconciled, for my faith in God to become more vital again. But the truth is something or someone is more important to us, whether we realize it or not, and there are things that push us to realize it.

We all have limited time on this earth, but we tend to distance ourselves from this reality, especially in this time and place where we

are shielded from death so often. We know it's out there, but we compartmentalize our thinking and distance ourselves from reality. It's why in Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*, when Emily asks the Stage Manager if any human beings realize life while they live it — every, every minute, the Stage Manager replies, “No. The saints and poets, maybe — they do some.”

But when we are given a diagnosis with a timeframe, and death suddenly becomes real, most people begin to realize life, we recognize that some people and things matter more and we want to focus on them, we spend the time we have in a way that reflects how precious it is. Jesus said that where our treasure is, there our heart will be also (Matthew 6:21). What or who we treasure most, and thus where our heart really is, is revealed when we know our time is short.

In Disney's 1992 film *Aladdin* our young hero ends up with a genie who offers to grant him three wishes. The genie, for whom the incomparable Robin Williams provides the voice, first tells him there are three things that are out of bounds. He can't kill anyone, he can't make anyone fall in love with someone else, and he can't bring anyone back from the dead. There go our first three wishes!

But what does Aladdin choose? He wants to be made a prince so that Princess Jasmine will fall in love with him, a stretching of the rules. He ends up needing to be saved from drowning — long story, there is an evil character in the film — so he uses his second wish for this purpose. And for his final wish, with some context and encouragement, he frees the genie so that he doesn't have to be a servant to whomever finds him.

Down to one wish, for whatever mixture of motives, Aladdin makes the choice to benefit someone else. It's not a bad example for us, somewhat like the example Solomon provides which God affirms and blesses. When Solomon chooses to think first of others, he ends up getting what he might have asked for himself and more. It doesn't always work this way. But putting others first is often the very thing that brings us the most fulfillment anyway.