

“Ask What I Shall Give You”

In the name of him in whom we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places, dear friends in Christ: The Holy Scriptures tell us that Solomon was someone who was particularly loved by the Lord. And I think it's worth noting *why* the Scriptures tell us this. You see, his older brother had died in infancy. That child had the misfortune to be the illegitimate son of David; that is, the child conceived of David's adulterous affair with Bathsheba, who was at the time the wife of Uriah the Hittite. You remember the story: how it was that David, upon learning of Bathsheba's problematic pregnancy – and his part in it, ultimately added to his sin the crime of arranging the death of her husband in order to cover things up and avoid a public scandal.

He may have fooled some of his subjects; but he could not conceal his sin from the Lord. When the prophet Nathan confronted David with his guilt, he confessed it and was forgiven; but the Lord went on to say that because the whole dirty business gave the enemies of God's people grounds to mock them and to ridicule the Lord's supposedly higher and holier laws, the son born to Bathsheba (who had since become David's wife) would surely die. That must have been an awful burden for both parents to bear: the knowledge that their son would die on account of their sin. We know that David spent the entire seven days following his son's birth lying facedown in fasting and prayer, begging the Lord to change the harsh decree – to no avail. The Lord had spoken his last word on the subject, and at the end of seven days the child died. Sin has consequences. Sin *always* has terrible and painful consequences, and unless we feel the sting at least some of the time, we imagine that we can go on sinning with impunity – until sin destroys us completely. It's actually God's mercy that he *doesn't* let us off scot-free every time we violate his holy Law.

In God's mercy then, David and Bathsheba were given a hard dose of reality – the worst thing any parent can suffer. But imagine what they must have been thinking when some time later Bathsheba conceived again. They would have been left wondering, “Are we going to have to suffer through it another time?” Has the Lord determined that we've learned the hard lesson, or are we going to have to live through the hell of losing another child because of sins we committed in the past? That worry would have consumed them. When the son was born then, they named him Solomon, which means *peace*. It was almost like a prayer – that this child would at last bring peace to their troubled consciences. A short time later they received a comforting word of confirmation from the Lord, “Yes, you call him Solomon, *peace* – and so for you he is; but to me he is *Jedidiah*, which means *beloved of the Lord*. You can be sure that my special favor rests on him.”

This more than anything is no doubt why Solomon was chosen to succeed David to the throne of Israel, even though the king had a number of older sons by other wives who naturally assumed that they had a stronger claim to the throne. But God's favor rested on Solomon. That's whom David wanted to rule over God's people when he was gone. And so it happened that Solomon became king when he was still quite young – as we heard him say in this morning's lesson, “I am but a little child”. The occasion was the Lord's appearance to the young king at Gibeon, where, as we also heard, the Lord handed Solomon the proverbial blank check: “Ask what I shall give you.”

I want you to think about that for a minute. Put yourself in Solomon's royal sandals. You know that the Lord's special favor rest on you. He's given a crown to wear and placed you in a position of honor and privilege. And now he comes to you and says, "Ask me for anything you want. Go ahead. Think big. Not even the sky is the limit – I am the Lord, after all. I can do anything. I can give you anything. What do you want?"

What would you ask for? When I cover this story with students at the school, I usually give them a homework assignment requiring that they give the matter some deep thought and write a paragraph explaining what they'd ask for and why. And to make it a bit more challenging, they aren't allowed to give Solomon's answer. Though I should learn not to be disappointed with the deep-thinking capacity of preteens, or perhaps it's with their *eagerness* to finish the assignment as *efficiently* as possible (by which I mean without actually exercising any brain cells), I'm always amazed at how short-sighted and materialistic the majority of the answers are. Oh, there will be a couple of thoughtful ones; but most will be for a car or a motorbike or a coveted video game system or a certain amount of money – and usually not very much money. I guess they don't want to sound too greedy, or maybe it's that they think that a thousand dollars, say, is a huge amount. Maybe to a kid it is. But I read such answers and think, "C'mon, it's *the Lord* who's making the offer. You can have *anything*. Is *that* the best you can come up with?"

Then again, I'm not sure any of us who are older and supposedly wiser would do much better. It is our sinful nature to be short-sighted, materialistic, and selfish. Oh, we might ask for things that are bigger and grander, I'm sure; but you've got to admit that your first impulse is ask for something that primarily benefits yourself – some thing or some ability that serves to your maximum advantage. How many of us would think first of asking for something that primarily pleases the Lord? Not too many, I would guess. But when you think about, shouldn't that be the first consideration? I mean, would you really want to ask for something that the Lord in his infinite wisdom doesn't want you to have – that he knows is not good for you in the long run? History is replete with people who got what they thought they wanted and then lived to regret it bitterly. The story of King Midas is a myth; but it contains a great truth.

So, *what would* you ask for? And how could you be sure that the Lord would be pleased with your request? We're told that the Lord was pleased with Solomon's request; but what was it about it in particular that made it so pleasing to the Lord? There are several things we could name; but most importantly, I think, is this: he asked for a gift with which he could serve others. He had been made king. It was his job to rule on behalf of his subjects, to make their lives better, to keep them safe, secure, and prosperous. He knew that he didn't have it within himself to do that. So he asked for the ability to do that *for them*, not for himself. And so I think we could state this general rule: we can be sure our own requests are pleasing to the Lord when we ask for something with which we can serve others.

That's a great place to start; but I'd like us to look at Solomon's request in a little more detail. Usually when we speak of this story, we describe it as the one in which Solomon asks the Lord for *wisdom*. And I suppose that's a good English shorthand way to say what he asks for; but it's not a very literal translation from the Hebrew of what he actually says – with the result that something gets lost. What he actually asks for is "a heart that listens to judgment". And two things pop out at us here. The first is that Solomon understands that the judgment he seeks is not something he's going to have within himself; but rather that comes from the outside – from another source. That's why

he wants a heart that is able to listen to it and know it when he hears it. Say it another way: it's not that Solomon seeks to be wise and understanding in and of himself; but rather he wants to keep his ear tuned and attentive to the Lord and his Word, the source of all wisdom and understanding, so that he can consistently apply it for the good of those he serves as judge.

The second thing is the concept of judgment itself. When we hear the word judge or judgment, we tend to think of the guy in the black robe with a gavel in his hand who listens to cases and determines the guilt or innocence of people who are accused of crimes, and who then decrees the penalty those determined to be guilty shall pay. Apart from that context, we have a rather negative view of judgment. We're told that we shouldn't judge others and that those who do are wrong for doing so. But the Hebrew idea of judgment is much richer in meaning and far more positive in character. For the ancient Israelites, *to judge* meant to reestablish peace and harmony between parties in conflict. It meant to hear all the sides of a debate or a dispute and decide upon a solution that would best restore peaceful coexistence to the entire community. I hasten to add that means more than just deciding right and wrong in an absolute sense, for in a fallen world justice must be tempered with mercy in order for peace to exist. Judgment also included coming up with solutions to solve other crises: what to do during a famine to ensure everyone gets fed, how to resolve a water shortage to make sure no one has to do without; that kind of thing. It also meant organizing and leading military forces against invading enemies when necessary. Think of the judges of Israel like Gideon and Samson: they are known mostly as deliverers from oppressors.

So in asking the Lord for "a heart that listens to judgment", Solomon wasn't just saying, "Make me a wise guy so I know a lot and can show off how clever I am"; he was requesting that God use him as his agent to establish and maintain a happy state of peace, prosperity, and freedom from oppression for the people of Israel. He was saying, "Use me your as your servant to bring your people the peace and blessing of God".

And that, of course, was a request the Lord God delighted to hear because it is precisely the same request that God the Son made to his heavenly Father – and indeed that he continues to make even today. It was in fulfillment of that request that the Son of God came down from glory above and was born our brother in flesh. It was in fulfillment of that request that he lived for us a perfect life, that he suffered and died on the cross bearing the sins of the entire world so that God's justice might be satisfied, and that he rose again to life to show that God's peace rests upon us again – that his mercy, forgiveness, and love—and all the blessings of heaven are ours for Christ's sake.

In this way, he is to us like Solomon's older brother: the one who died for the sins of others. And each and every one of us is like Solomon: born of sinful parents and guilty of plenty of sin ourselves. Yet the Lord pronounces his peace upon us for our older brother, the only begotten Son of God's sake; and he calls us *Jedidiah*: "Beloved of the Lord". That's what he said to you when you were baptized. Through water and his Word, he united you with Christ and said, "You are my child with whom I am well pleased. This washing of rebirth in my Holy Spirit is the sign that my special favor rests on you. Through it I have made you my child and an heir of the kingdom. I've placed on your head the crown of life. I've robed you in the righteousness of Christ. And I've given you in a position of honor and privilege in my kingdom."

I asked you before to think about what you would request of the Lord if he came to you like he did to Solomon saying, "Ask what I shall give you." This is not merely a theoretical exercise. If you've followed at all what I've been saying, then you understand that this is precisely what the Lord *is* saying to you – and not just once – but each and every day of your life. Look: Solomon offered a thousand rams on the altar of the Lord at Gibeon, and then the Lord appeared to him. But for you the ultimate Sacrifice of God's Son has already been accepted. As a result, in Christ, all heavenly blessings are yours for the taking. And the Lord stands before you asking, "What shall I give you?" Forgiveness of sin? You got it. The peace of God that passes all understanding? It's yours. Eternal life in glory? Coming up.

But don't stop there. What else will you have? Think big. It's the Lord who's asking. His resources are endless. And he *wants* to bless you – and in particular, he wants to bless you in ways that will help you serve others. Let me make that clear: I'm not talking the false health and welfare gospel here – that lie that drives so much of evangelicalism in this country about how the Lord wants you to be rich and famous and perpetually young and healthy. That's a load of garbage. It only appeals to the selfish, short-sighted, materialistic sin nature in each of us. In fact, a good request to start with is that the Lord would work in you to kill that kind of self-centered desire. He'll do it. And that will open the eyes of your heart to see the needs and concerns of others so that you can ask the Lord for the desire and the means to serve them.

And listen: we don't need to be shy about this. We're not beggars standing outside asking for scraps from the Lord's Table. No. He's already invited us in and seated us with the family. St. James writes, "You have not because you ask not." So let's ask. Fill my plate with your goodness, O Lord. Let my cup overflow. To ask for anything less is to insult the Lord's generosity.

Oh, and I might as well mention that unlike the assignment I give my students, you're allowed to ask for what Solomon did. That's a request that you already know pleases the Lord. So, let's ask that too. Let's make it a New Year's resolution: that each and every day we ask the Lord to give us understanding hearts always listening to the wisdom and judgments of his Word, so that we too may be his servants – his agents in this world to resolve conflicts, free those oppressed by sin and guilt, and to bring people God's eternal peace that passes all understanding through the knowledge of his Son Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!