

ASK

I Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14

August 16, 2009

A little girl, dressed in her Sunday best, was running as fast as she could in order to avoid being late for Sunday School. As she ran, she prayed: "Dear Lord, please don't let me be late!"

Concentrating more on her running and praying than on her surroundings, she tripped on a curb and fell. Quickly she got back up and began to run and pray again.

This time the words in her prayer were: "Dear Lord, please don't let me be late...but, don't shove me either!"

A five-year-old offered this prayer before his family's meal one night: "Dear God, thank you for these pancakes."

When he was finished, his parents asked him why he thanked God for pancakes when they were having chicken.

An impish smile formed on the little boy's face as he whispered: "I thought I'd see if God was paying attention."

A young soldier fighting in Italy during World War II jumped into a foxhole as bullets whizzed over his head. He immediately tried to deepen the hole for more protection. Frantically scraping the dirt away with his hands he unearthed a silver crucifix obviously left by a previous foxhole resident.

A few moments later another soldier dove into the foxhole with him as more bullets passed over their heads. When the first soldier had a chance to look more closely at his new roommate, he noticed that he was an army chaplain. Holding out the crucifix, the first soldier excitedly shouted, "Am I glad to see you! How do you work this thing?"

We chuckle at these stories a bit, but we do so with the full knowledge that they at least partially represent some of our own attempts at and attitudes about prayer. We too have at times found ourselves wondering whether the things that happen to us are God's answers to our prayers or just natural results of the situations we've gotten ourselves into. We too have at times wondered if God's paying attention. We too have wondered at times if we really know how to get prayer to work.

Normally when we think of prayer models we think of the outline Jesus shared with his disciples when they sought his help with their prayer life – you know, when they said to him: "Jesus, teach us to pray."

We call to mind what Jesus said to them: "Brothers and sisters, pray like this: have in your mind the personal, intimate relationship with God that is ours. At the same time, recognize the awesomeness of God. And so, pray something like this: 'Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.'

“Then, preface your requests with the acknowledgement that you understand that any response from God will be in the light of the larger, eternal picture. You know, pray something like: ‘Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.’

“Then, make your petitions to God keeping in mind your basic, everyday human needs since they’re all that are really necessary. A good example would be something like: ‘Give us this day our daily bread.’

“Then, acknowledge the times in your life when you’ve not lived up to God’s desire for you. Seek God’s forgiveness as you resolve to forgive those who’ve crossed your boundary lines. You know, something like: ‘Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.’

“And finally, acknowledge your inability to stay out of compromising situations without God’s help. Offer something like: ‘Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.’”

There’s no question this prayer from the lips of Jesus provides us a wonderful model for our praying. But, there are other prayers in the scriptures that also provide us some guidance. One of those prayers is this one prayed by Solomon in today’s I Kings, chapter 3 text. But, before we look at Solomon’s prayer we need to remind ourselves of the soap-opera-like world Solomon was raised in and contributed to.

We initially look at the first part of today’s reading about Solomon’s father’s death. It was a long-time coming – some folks would offer too long. Some remind us of the stuff of David’s life that was not all glory and faithfulness. One preacher offers: “David is so advanced in years, so old, that he cannot get warm. They cover him with clothes, but he does not get warm. They bring him a young maiden to lie beside him, but he does not get warm. I imagine David shivers in the knowledge of all that his life has taught him, the hard way. At the end of his life, David shivers in the knowledge that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”¹

Remember now, that Solomon’s mother was Bathsheba – and remember that Solomon was a child conceived in an extramarital affair between David and Bathsheba. The Reader’s Digest version of the rest of that story is that David maneuvered Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah, to the front line of a war so that he would be killed to cover up David’s indiscretion. Bathsheba was then added to David’s harem. The prophet, Nathan, confronted David and enabled him to face himself. Then, there are stories of rape and murder and civil war. David’s sons, Absalom and Amnon, reveal the emotional cost of their father’s misdeeds and neglect. Amnon raped his half-sister, Tamar. Absalom murdered Amnon for abusing his sister and because of his dad’s, David’s, failure to act. Absalom fled to wait for his dad to die so that he could assume the throne, got tired of waiting, gained control of the power, lost it and was killed, thus causing his dad, David, to be consumed with grief.

There were more trials – a rebellion – a famine – another war – and a family power struggle between several of David’s sons. Finally, Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan trick the aged, confused David

into thinking that he had promised the kingship to his much younger son, Solomon.

In the portion of scripture not read this morning between the two parts read, we learn the hard-ball politics that took place before Solomon's final ascension to the throne – the nasty infighting of the candidates, David's sons, for the throne. Suffice it to say, modern-day political party primaries have nothing over the brutality of shifts in power in the days of Solomon and David. Solomon has his brother, Adonijah, his father David's old crony, General Joab, and quite a few more foes and friends killed all in order to solidify his political position.

But, removing political rivals wasn't the only method Solomon used to increase his power and influence. Marriage and religion were two of the more significant others. Chapter three of I Kings begins with the report of the marriage between Solomon and the Pharaoh's daughter thus assuring Solomon of a friendly relationship between his Israel and its most powerful neighbor, Egypt.

The marriage wasn't just a wise political move though. It was also a wise religious move and it wasn't the only such move made on the part of Solomon. Get this: Solomon married more than 699 more wives. Plus, he had another 300 women, concubines, ready to rush to his side. His taste for foreign ladies got him into all kinds of trouble. Financial was one of them. The really big one was that the women in his life practiced a variety of religions. Near the end of his life Solomon decided not to take any chances and built elaborate altars all over to many of the gods of his women.

It wasn't just at the end of his life that Solomon was guilty of being a religious chameleon though. In the early part of our chapter three of I Kings we also read of it: "Solomon showed his love for the Lord by walking according to the statues of his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places."

Solomon was so possessed with a desire to succeed that he would do anything to guarantee it happening. He would purge his nation of political and religious enemies. He would marry for diplomatic reasons. And yes, he would bow before any religious shrine he thought might be able to help him.

In the midst of his pursuing his political goals through all these morally despicable means, something happened to Solomon – something changed him. It happened when he met up with the God of Israel in a dream at a holy place called Gibeon.

The Solomon we witness in the dream encounter with God in today's passage doesn't seem to be the same guy about whom we've been talking. No longer was he the confident, ruthless politician. In place of that man was a man who appeared to take an honest look at himself. There was the admittance of being concerned about whether he had the ability to lead the powerful Israel. There was the acknowledgment of his sensing himself unprepared and inadequate. Comparing himself to his father, David, the young Solomon felt insignificant and inadequate. "I am but a little child; I know not how to go out or come in."

At Gibeon, you see, Solomon met God. Encountering God humbled him. Knowing what we know of Solomon's past and what happened during his later leadership, we have to wonder how sincere he was – about whether this was just another example of his knowing the right buttons to push – even of God. Despite our skepticism, there does seem to be a sense of genuineness about his prayer. We don't have to read much further in the book to know that he did not maintain his humility but the experience of the divine that came to him at Gibeon corrected his spiritual focus at least momentarily. His ambitious efforts to secure his political future seemed impotent in the presence of Israel's God.

Now, what this implies to us about our prayer life is that if we want God to hear us – if we want to be prepared for an in-depth encounter with God – then, we first have to be willing to honestly look at ourselves. We need to approach God prepared to face our limitations – our inadequacies. We need to enter times of prayer with humble spirits.

And, while in this state of humility – while looking into the mirror at who he really was – Solomon responded to God's invitation to ask for what he wanted God to give him by requesting an understanding heart so that he might judge wisely – so that he might know – discern – between good and evil, between right and wrong. "Your people, O Lord, deserve that kind of leader. They are a great people - ?who has the ability to make decisions for them? It appears I am to be that man but I sense I lack the ability in myself to do what the task requires."

I am tempted to offer, "Duh." "Really, Solomon, you think you lack the necessary wisdom to decide on behalf of people after the way you've lived your life?" Think of it, friends – the man who was a party to tricking his father in order to attain the kingship - the man who ordered the killing of several of his father's and his own political enemies - the man who ordered the execution of his own brother - the man who married for political gain - the man who worshiped a variety of gods for the enhancement of his political image – that same man admitted being anxious about being able to decide fairly for the good of others and asked for such ability/such insight.

Solomon could have asked for anything, you understand: riches, more power, good health, a long life, the further removal of his enemies. But, he didn't. Instead he asked for the ability to look beyond the obvious information into the hearts of those whom he had to lead so that he could render just judgments. And God gave Solomon what he asked for – and more. God rewarded Solomon's appropriate request by providing him riches and honor. Now, we need to be careful what we read into this result – but, we'll come back to that in just a minute.

The second thing Solomon's prayer implies for us about prayer is that what we need to seek from God in our prayers is that which will allow us to live in relationship with others on God's behalf – that which will allow us to fulfill who God has called us to be in this world – that which will allow us to do in this world what God calls us to do. It isn't about seeking riches – material things – power. We need to be careful that our prayer life doesn't begin to appear like that referred to in a little poem I've used before entitled The Yuppie's Prayer:

"Now I lay me down to sleep

I pray my cuisinart to keep
I pray my stocks are on the rise
And that my analyst is wise
That all the wine I sip is white
And that my hot tub's watertight
That racquetball won't get too tough
That all my sushi's fresh enough
I pray my cordless phone still works
That my career won't lose its perks
My microwave won't radiate
My condo won't depreciate
I pray my health club doesn't close
And that my money market grows
If I go broke before I wake
I pray my Volvo they won't take."²

Solomon's prayer and God's reaction witness to the opposite. Seek ye the kingdom of God – seek ye proper relationships with God and God's people – face yourself – seek from God what others need from you and God will take care of the rest.

However, and here's the point I promised a few moments ago we'd come back to, we need to be careful that we do not forget Jesus' teachings in this regard. Obedience – seeking the kingdom of God – will not guarantee us fame and fortune, neither as individuals nor as a church. We will not necessarily profit or have an easier life because we choose to be good and follow God's will for our lives. Our prayer lives may not get us the results Solomon got. The book of Kings and other writers in the Old Testament suggest that obedience and piety pays off in visible ways. But, the authors of Psalm 73 and Job and the teachings of Jesus warn us that life doesn't always work that way and that we should be careful expecting those kinds of results from our discipleship and prayer life.

So, be forewarned fellow Christians, obedience and sacrifice and risk go together when we choose Christ as our master. And it is the wisdom to deal with these realities that should be for which we ask when we pray. Let us pray.

Lord, God of our lives, if you were willing to listen to a guy like Solomon we are hopeful that you will listen to people like us. We are embarrassed by our witness of you in our lives, both as individuals and as a church. We do so much want to turn over new leaves and live our lives in such a way that others might feel accepted by us and thus You. Heal our broken spirits, our misspent lives so that we might witness for you in our daily living. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

1. Sue Anne Steffey Morrow, "The Dream for Wisdom," The Beginning of Wisdom (Lima: CSS Publishing Co., 1993), 1-55673-614-2.
2. John A. Bernbaum, "Why Work?"