

Wisdom From On High  
1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14

Solomon was young. He may have been in his early teens. He was certainly no older than our average Midshipman. And he was also inexperienced. By his own admission, he felt like a little child in the face of overwhelming responsibilities. For you see, his father, King David, had died, leaving him as his successor; and it was now his task to rule the kingdom.

Feeling his own inadequacy in the face of such responsibility, and sensing his need for divine assistance, he went to God in worship. And God appeared to Solomon in a dream saying, "Ask what I should give you." And Solomon said, "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. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give 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?" And God 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, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind." (1 Ki. 3:5, 7-9 NRSV)

Wisdom! Wisdom is essential for success in life. Plebes, you're about to embark upon a four year course of study designed to increase your knowledge and enhance your wisdom. But wisdom isn't only for our Plebes. Whether you're a young Midshipman, a Plebe parent, or advanced in years, all of us need wisdom if we're to succeed in life. Proverbs 28:26 says, "Those who trust in their own wits are fools; but those who walk in wisdom come through safely." (NRSV) Yes, if you want to live well and come through safely then you must be wise.

But what is wisdom? Wisdom is the ability to discern the difference between right and wrong so you can choose the right and eschew the wrong. So Solomon prayed to God saying, "Give your servant an understanding mind...able to discern the difference between good and evil." And God gave him "a wise and discerning mind."

Yes, wisdom is the ability to discern between right and wrong which means right and wrong are real; good and evil exist. Now there was a time when such an assertion as that would not have been considered remarkable at all. Instead, it would have been readily accepted by nearly everyone. There was a time when everyone seemed to acknowledge the reality of right and wrong and the existence of good and evil. Although they may not always have agreed on every point of right or wrong, there was a time when most everyone would have agreed on the reality of their existence. But we no longer live in such a time as that. Instead, we live in what philosophers call a

postmodern period where the reality of right and wrong is challenged and the existence of good and evil is doubted.

In a postmodern world, there are no objective truths and there are certainly no moral absolutes. Nothing is considered right or wrong for everyone. The most you can say about right or wrong in a postmodern world is that something may be right or wrong for you but it isn't necessarily right or wrong for everyone else. Evidence of this prevailing world view was discovered by the Barna research group a few years ago. According to Barna, only 34% of American adults believed in absolute moral truth in 2009.<sup>1</sup> That means that two thirds of Americans doubted its existence. I can't imagine things have gotten any better in the past few years.

Please hear me carefully. I'm not suggesting that everything is black and white, right or wrong. No, not everything is absolute; but some moral absolutes are absolutely true. Yes, Solomon's prayer reminds us that right and wrong are real; good and evil exist. And some things are right or wrong for everyone. Solomon's prayer also reminds us that we often need wisdom to discern what they are; we often need wisdom to discern the difference between right and wrong, good and evil. I say "often" but not always. In many instances, the difference between right and wrong is clearly articulated in the Bible.

You see, the Bible is our guide to moral truth. Second Timothy 3:16 says, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." (NRSV) Psalm 119:9-11 says, "How can young people keep their way pure? By guarding it according to your word. With my whole heart I seek you; do not let me stray from your commandments. I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you." (NRSV) And when God gave Solomon the gift of wisdom, he said to Solomon, "If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments...then I will lengthen your life." (1 Ki. 3:14 NRSV) In saying this, God told Solomon that Solomon would find right and wrong in a careful study of God's statutes and commandments.

And so in many instances, the difference between right and wrong is clearly articulated in the Bible.

- You shall not murder.
- You shall not commit adultery.
- You shall not steal.
- You shall not bear false witness.

These and a whole host of other moral absolutes are clearly outlined in the Bible. We don't need wisdom to discern them. We just need a heart to obey them. But there are many other matters where the Bible is not so clear. Throughout life we are confronted

with circumstances where there is no biblical prohibition or admonition to guide us. There may be biblical principles to inform us but there are no verses that says, "Thou shalt do this; thou shalt not do that." In these instances we need wisdom to discern the difference between right and wrong.

Interestingly enough, Solomon was confronted with just such a situation immediately after praying for the gift of wisdom. The tale is told in 1 Kings 3:16-28. Two women came to Solomon. These women lived together in the same house and they both gave birth within days of one another. Shortly thereafter, one of the children died in the night and its mother exchanged it for the living child while the other mother slept. In the morning, the other mother awoke and recognized that the dead child was not hers and a heated argument ensued. This argument was quickly carried to the king for settlement.

Now there was nothing in sacred scripture to guide Solomon's decision on who should have the baby. So do you know what Solomon did? He said, "Bring me a sword." And then he said, "Divide the living boy in two; give half to the one woman, and half to the other." And as soon as he said that, the real mother cried out in agony and said, "Please, my lord, give her the living boy," while the other woman said in essence, "Divide it; if I can't have it, neither can you!" And in that moment, Solomon realized who the real mother was and gave her the living child. You see, Solomon was wise enough to understand a mother's love. He knew the real mother would surrender her son before she would allow a hair on his head to be harmed. He understood human nature and was wise enough to apply that understanding to discern the identity of the real mother.

Like Solomon, we are often confronted with situations where right and wrong are not always obvious; where good and evil are not always clear. In those times, we need wisdom to discern the difference between the two. How do we get that wisdom? Well wisdom comes to those who pray and listen!

When God said, "Ask what I should give you," Solomon said, "Give your servant an understanding mind...able to discern between good and evil." You see, Solomon prayed for an understanding mind! It's important to pray for wisdom from above. Why is it important to pray for wisdom from above? Because the world is full of its own kind of wisdom. And the world's wisdom often conflicts with God's wisdom. The world's wisdom is frequently motivated by selfishness rather than godliness and by self-interest rather than any interest in the common good. The world's wisdom is full of practical advice on how to succeed and how to get ahead, often at the expense of others and almost always to the neglect of God.

In the New Testament, the book of James describes the world's wisdom. "Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down

from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.” (Ja. 3:13-15 NRSV) James then goes on to describe wisdom from above. In contrast to the world’s wisdom, God’s wisdom leads us upward toward God and outward in loving service of our neighbor. James says, “...wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” (Ja. 3:17 NRSV)

If we want God’s wisdom rather than the world’s wisdom then we have to seek it. We have to ask for it. We have to pray for it. You see, prayer orients our heart toward heaven so we give priority to God’s wisdom over the world’s ways. That’s why James says, “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.” (Ja. 1:5 NRSV) So we need to pray for God’s wisdom instead of merely aping the world’s ways.

But please don’t misunderstand me. I’m not suggesting that you’ll find no wisdom in the world. Yes, there’s worldly wisdom that contradicts God’s wisdom and that wisdom needs to be rejected. But in addition to worldly wisdom, there’s wisdom in the world that comports with the wisdom of God. And you need to look for it and listen to it. That’s why you Midshipmen are at a major university. You’re here to be exposed not only to scientific facts in your STEM classes, but to the world’s best wisdom from philosophers, ethicists, authors, and poets. You need to listen to them and learn from them.

You see, when God said, “Ask what I should give you,” Solomon said, “Give your servant an understanding mind.” In Hebrew, Solomon actually said, “Give your servant a hearing heart.” You see, Solomon prayed for the ability to listen, and listen deeply, to all the voices around him so he could get wisdom from every one of them. And Solomon was quite successful in listening to and learning from others. The very next chapter in Kings begins with nineteen verses describing Solomon’s cabinet and key officials. I suspect he often got advice from them to help him govern the kingdom. And what was the consequence of their wise advice? After listing them by name, 1 Kings 4:20 says, “Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand by the sea; they ate and drank and were happy.” (NRSV)

Yes, Solomon listened to the people about him and he also listened to the world around him. For example, he listened to the voices of nature and learned many valuable lessons for life from them – many of which are recorded in the book of Proverbs. So 1 Kings 4:32-34 says, “He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish. People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon.” (NRSV)

Yes, Solomon “was wiser than anyone else” (1 Ki. 4:31 NRSV) because he prayed for wisdom, orienting his heart toward heaven and giving priority to God’s wisdom over the world’s ways. And he “was wiser than anyone else” because he had a hearing heart; he

listened deeply to wise men and a wonderful world and learned life lessons from them all.

My friends, wisdom is essential for success in life. Proverbs 28:26 says, “Those who trust in their own wits are fools; but those who walk in wisdom come through safely.” (NRSV) May you and I and all of us pray as Solomon prayed: “Lord, give your servant an understanding mind...able to discern the difference between good and evil.” And may God give each of us a wise and discerning mind as we also pray and listen. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/325-barna-studies-the-research-offers-a-year-in-review-perspective#.Vcz58JjD\\_L8](https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/325-barna-studies-the-research-offers-a-year-in-review-perspective#.Vcz58JjD_L8). Accessed 13 Aug 15.