

Stuff We Need & Stuff We Don't

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Chapter 3 of I Kings opens with King Solomon's first act of his own initiative: forming a political alliance with Egypt by marrying one of the Pharaoh's daughters. Then, he prays. He prays awake and asleep.

In his dream prayers, Solomon and God have a conversation, in the language of Deuteronomy. It's a happy chapter, chapter 3.

King David gets redeemed - see how history remembers him here?

. . . he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart towards you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today.

Slightly sanitized . . . but not wholly untrue. A more comfortable version for the public to carry into the future.

As it turns out, a passage I picked months ago is particularly fitting for the first Sunday of a new academic year AND for the baptism Sunday of a pretty awesome young man. AND - in the shape of a pretty simple outline.



Solomon, college freshmen, newlyweds, new believers - all of them at a sort of "fresh start" time of life - or anyone, really, ready to change, to ask and to answer, "Who does God want me to be now, from this moment and in this place?"

Twenty-seven years I've lived here. Twenty-seven times I've known better and still . . . on Wednesday - IU move in day - I went to Staples. For three little things we positively needed for the office. A mom held up two desk calendars and asked her son which one he wanted.

"Neither," he said, "I use my phone for my calendar."

"You NEED a desk calendar," she insisted.

“Then you pick,” he said. She seethed.

I got my three things and left, quick as I could. The whole vibe in that store was anxiety.

So much of being ready - for anything - is having the right stuff, acquiring the right stuff, organizing it, using it. Even spiritual stuff. This passage is about the spiritual stuff we need, to belong to God *well*. This deuteronomic prayer talk in chapter 3 begins with God asking Solomon, “What do you want me to give you?” The conversation, and the lesson, ride on Solomon’s answer. He wants to be a good king like his dad was. He wants to be wise. He wants to be obedient. He wants to serve his people.

Think of it! The Creator, the inventor and shopkeeper of the entire universe, offers a man absolutely anything he wants, and the man chooses the three slowest-moving items in the whole store.



The stuff God expected him to ask for - to be rich, to be popular, to have a long life and to be a winner - stuff they can’t keep on the shelves of the store, Solomon doesn’t even mention. Now if I put all this on a board and ask any Sunday School kid what three God most wants to give us, they’d know the answer.



Because *knowing* which is the right stuff is easy compared to *wanting* it more than we want anything else in the whole store . . . the whole world. Developing a taste and a hunger for what God wants to give us takes a lifetime of faith and of practice. One of my stand-by illustrations: the woman at the Weight Watchers meeting who asked, “Exactly what counts as a medium-sized apple?” To which the leader replied, “Ladies, it’s not the size of our apples

that got us into this situation!” The spiritual fact is this: we hunger for all kinds of stuff we don’t need.

Can you think of an example? One you will share? One that isn’t food?



◆ RICHES - money ~

I like money, find it useful for all kinds of things: weddings, college tuition, chicken feed. We need money to take care of ourselves and our families. But it has no spiritual value at all. Money won’t make God love us more. The only way money helps us grow in faith is when we give it away. And if we have taken Jesus’ teaching to heart, when we walk in the Holy Spirit money will never leave us feeling safer and more peaceful than the faith in us and the confidence of God’s presence with us.

◆ HONOR ~

These days we’d say popular or powerful. I read an article in which kids were asked what they want to be when they grew up, and a scary large percentage of them said, “a celebrity.” To be popular, famous, powerful, known to be the star of our own life, however small the stage. I wonder if it speaks of a spiritual hunger to belong, to be known. A desire that being famous would seem to satisfy, but necessarily doesn’t. Faith in Jesus satisfies it. Belonging to him, being known by him, satisfies it.

God is pleased as punch when Solomon doesn’t even mention it.

◆ LONG LIFE ~

Once Ben and I visited Ruth Houdeshel. She was well past 90. Her hearing was bad. Ben said, “Mrs. Houdeshel, you are looking very well.” To which she replied, “Yes, unfortunately.” Now that we belong to God, we’ve no need to cling to this life, to treat birthdays as trophies. The goal is not to fill life with years but fill years with faith and all the love, hope, justice, peace and joy therein.

◆ Neither did Solomon ask for the LIFE OF HIS ENEMIES.

He might have said, “No more wars, God. Vanquish my enemies here and now.” So he’d never have to fight another battle, risk another loss. I don’t have any enemies at the border that I know of. But I’m very prone to believe - even when I don’t admit that I believe it - that in order for me to gain, others must lose. That all of life is a contest, a battle, an argument.

But he didn't ask always to be a winner either. And God liked that about Solomon. Instead of money and long life and winning, Solomon asked for wisdom and obedience and service - the stuff, I would offer today, the servants of God need more than we need everything else.



◆ WISDOM

Wisdom is also called discernment or, some translations say, an understanding mind. I think of wisdom as having the vision and the hearing and the intellect and the heart to do the hard work of watching and listening and thinking and praying and waiting for as long as it takes to figure out the difference between right and wrong - not what seems right by the thinking of good people but what measures up to the will of God, as the will of God has to do with love and hope and justice and peace and joy, not just for me and mine, but for those within the reach of my words and my actions.

◆ OBEDIENCE

Obedience is the opposite of honor. When we are obedient, we act - we LIVE - to do God's will, not to enhance our own. We act and live to sow and to reap God's eternal purposes in the world: love, hope, justice, peace, and joy. Obedience is done a day at a time and takes decades, centuries. Sometimes what we worked for isn't harvested until long after our names and our part are forgotten. And what the world calls necessary or good - even the better parts of this world - aren't necessarily the same as what God desires and would have us spend ourselves accomplishing.

The riches of God - love, hope, justice, peace, joy, faith - they aren't for sale, and yet they cost us everything: time, strength, sacrifice. God gives them and yet we have to want them, to treasure them, to work them day in and day out like muscles, being really bad at the work for a long, long time and doing it anyway, finding joy and purpose in it anyway.

◆ And finally, SERVICE: Solomon refers to the people, so many, many people, who live and thrive OR NOT depending on his leadership. He speaks of them like a father, a good father, determined to do right by God and by them. Their well-being guides him, has him coveting wisdom, craving discernment above all else.



And, the Bible says, God was pleased. Pleased to give him all he'd asked for and some of what he didn't.

13 I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honour all your life; no other king shall compare with you. 14 If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.

Now, truth be told, I wish I could snip out verses 13 and 14, since they sort of ruin my whole sermon idea - how God ends up promising Solomon the rest too, riches and long life, because he's chosen well the first time. It could be a late insert into the text, put here after the fact to explain why Solomon was so wealthy. But that's generally poor form for preachers to snip out the verses we don't like.

What holds true is that wisdom is more valuable than riches, obedience more useful than long life, and service more important than winning. And that's enough to work with . . . here on the first day of a new week, a new year, and a new life in faith, love, hope, justice, peace and joy.

