

I Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14
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When they were young, one of the favorite Disney movies for my kids was “Aladdin.” You remember the animated movie with Robin Williams as the genie. I can still hear Annie and Kendall walking around the house belting out “A whole new world.” But of course, they also liked to play the game of three wishes. In the movie, the genie gives Aladdin three wishes. If you could have three wishes, for what would you wish? Isn't that a common game that we used to play when we were kids? When I was young the most common answers seemed to be: a million dollars, to be a major league baseball player, and to have three more wishes. Of course this is just fantasy for us, but in our text from the Hebrew Scriptures, this is exactly what happens to Solomon, except that when he hears from God in a dream, it's only one wish. So if you only had one wish what would it be? If God were to speak to you saying, “Ask what I should give you.” What would you say?

Solomon asks for “an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.” Traditionally that has meant that Solomon asked for wisdom. In fact, God responds, “I give you a wise and discerning mind.” And because he asked for such a selfless thing, God says he will reward Solomon with riches and power and glory and all those things that he didn't ask for, but could have. From that moment on and throughout history Solomon is known and revered for his wisdom. Later in the Book of the Kings it says, “God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else; his fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations. He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in 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; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of

his wisdom.” (3:29-34)

So Solomon was a really smart guy. But is that what wisdom is? Is it intelligence? Now, in all modesty, I'm a fairly smart guy. I got good grades all through school and I'm good at games like Trivial Pursuit. But I've always wanted to be wise more than smart. When I first went to college in Spokane, Washington there was another guy from my hometown and home church who went to the same school who was also a freshman, but I was only 18 and Tom was 25. He had the misfortune of taking a year off after he had graduated from high school and then having his number come up in the draft lottery. Some of you remember those days when young men would worry and worry about the lottery that might decide whether or not they would be heading for Vietnam. So instead of going to college in his early twenties, he spent four years in the Navy. Despite the difference in our ages we got to be close friends, and I would often talk over with Tom all the problems that a college freshman living away from home for the first time has. And no matter what the issue was, Tom seemed to be able to share something that put things into perspective. It dawned on me one day that Tom was wise. I was smart, but Tom was wise. I knew lots of things, but Tom knew how things fit together. He saw things in a way that I didn't. I had a lot of information in my head, but he had something that was beyond what was in his head. At first I thought it was his age or his experience, but later I realized that wisdom was more than just knowing things or experiences. Wisdom is a way of seeing the connections between things, it is being aware of what is around you but also seeing the big picture. The Greek philosopher Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*, says that wisdom is the understanding of causes, not just knowing that things are a certain way, but it is realizing why things are that way.

The Hebrew Scriptures tell us that Solomon was wise and they revere him for his wisdom.

But there is an interesting thing about this text if we look more closely. The scriptures that we have say that Solomon asks for an understanding mind. But that's not really what the Hebrew text says. Literally in Hebrew, Solomon asks that he may receive a “listening heart.” Is that the same thing? Unlike Western cultures, which primarily associated the heart with feelings and emotions, Near Eastern culture

emphasized the heart's role in thinking, reasoning and planning. We might say that those things happen in the mind, but for the Hebrew Scriptures the heart is the seat of rational thought and intentions.¹ So when Solomon asks for a listening heart, he is asking for understanding, but he is asking for more than that. He wants the ability to judge God's people with a listening heart. We could use more of that, don't you think? When we think of our leaders, when we think of our political process, are we looking for someone who has a listening heart? How much do our leaders listen to the people? How much do they listen to each other? When we have a debate, it's not really a debate anymore, they don't really talk to each other, let alone listen to each other. How great would it be to have leaders who have a listening heart? Or at least listen to the questions that they are asked?

The session of our church met this last Wednesday and one of the things we had to discuss was whether or not we were going to return to mask wearing for indoor meetings in the church, both for vaccinated and unvaccinated people. And as I'm sure you can guess, our elders did not all agree with one another. But as we were discussing the issue and what it meant for our church, it occurred to me that these people were listening to each other. These were people who, like Solomon had listening hearts. They were taking time to listen to what one another had to say. They were wise. Because they were seeking to follow Christ's command that we love one another.

Whether you call it a listening heart, wisdom is the discovery of how things fit together, in love. And that always begins and ends with God. This is how we begin to know and love God. And the end of wisdom is to live in loving relationship with God and with one another—that is why we have been created. And the person who discovers that love is the purpose of life is truly wise.

1 New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, vol. 2, pp. 764-5.