

## Called to Wisdom

### 1 Kings 3:3-9

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They say that leadership is getting more and more difficult. But according to King Solomon, it has always been difficult. We need wisdom in order to lead. According to Solomon, we need more wisdom than we have.

After David died, there was a little confusion about who the next king would be. Adonijah was David's oldest living son. Some, including Adonijah, thought he should be king. But David had promised the throne to Solomon, the son of Bathsheba. The people and the leadership were pretty much split by these two candidates. For a while no one was sure who would be king as the lobbying, intrigue, and legal maneuvers continued. Then Solomon had Adonijah killed, which at least had the benefit of providing clarity.

One of the reasons why I love the Bible is that it refuses to sanitize the characters it portrays for us. The Bible is filled with real people who have a really hard time discerning, much less doing, the right things in life. Most of the time, like us, the biblical characters are not all bad or all good. They are a confusing mess of good intentions and bad ideas about how to make their dreams work out. Solomon is no different. He wanted to be king and was willing to do anything, anything, to get there.

Maybe like Solomon, you too wanted to be in a position of leadership at work. Possibly without realizing it, you decided you would do anything to make partner, become the supervisor, get elected, or to receive tenure. And then after arriving in this position, you looked back at the things you did along the way and were horrified to discover the cost to your soul.

I do not believe that everyone is a leader, or even that everyone is called by God into leadership. But many of us are. And the process by which we got there is often confusing and messy. Sometimes it is our own souls that are most confused. We wonder if we have paid too much to be in leadership and if we have what it takes. We also wonder if we will survive the hard decisions, the conflict, the loneliness, and the blood on our hands. These are the questions that only leaders ask late at night.

Not long after Solomon became king, the Lord God appeared to him in a dream and asked, "What should I give you?" Now that's an amazing question. Most of the time when God shows up in someone's dreams, he is not asking questions. He's giving orders. Imagine late one night, after another incredibly hard day trying to serve the people you are leading, you shuffle into bed and fall asleep discouraged. But the Lord God Almighty appears to you and says, "Tell me what to give you." How are you going to respond to that? You get to ask God for one thing. What's it going to be? I know that most leaders would want to say, "Just get me out of this job!" Every leader I know dreams about chucking it all and getting a day-job. However, if it is God that you find in your dreams, it is not likely that he has arrived to get you out of your calling.

In perhaps the finest moment of his life, Solomon responds to God's question by saying, "Who can govern your great people? Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil." There it is. That it is what we most need from our leaders.

We need wise leaders, who can discern between good and evil. We do not need our leaders to always be right. Sometimes leadership is best demonstrated by confessing failure. We do not need our leaders to make us prosperous. Sometimes leaders must appeal to that which is noble within us and call us to sacrifice. We do not even need leaders always to be strong. The Third Reich of Germany, the Khmer Rouge of Cambodia, the Ku Klux Klan of our own nation were all built by leaders who were always strong. But a wise leader who can always discern between good and evil, well, that is a gift from heaven.

Since people are not all good, or all evil, the communities they build are a confusing mixture of good and evil. Be it a family, corporation, hospital, school, city, nation, or church, the leaders of these communities face myriad complicated decisions every day. The decisions are made complicated by competing agendas and confused claims about good and evil. Whether they realize it or not leaders use some criteria for making their decisions. Some use profit, political expediency, institutional preservation, or an effort always to be fair. But according to the Bible, the wise leader is committed most of all to sifting through the complexity of mixed motives in order to discern good from evil.

Calling people to the good may not be popular. It may not be profitable. It may not even be fair. Some may have to sacrifice more than others. But the difference in a leader and a manager is that the leader does not manage competing agendas. The leader leads people toward the good.

After God granted Solomon's request, helping him to see the wise and discerning choices, Solomon became the symbol of a theological stream in the Old Testament called Wisdom Literature. This literature affirms that God has planted within creation and our lives the ability to discern good from evil and find the right path in life. The Book of Proverbs is a wonderful illustration of this teaching. There is nothing miraculous or supernatural in Proverbs. Rather it is a distillation of wise and generally accessible teachings. Proverbs 1:20, for example claims, "Wisdom cries out in the streets; in the squares she raises her voice." So anyone can listen. In the third chapter Solomon tells us, "Happy are those who find wisdom and those who get understanding." In other words, if you look hard enough, you can find the good choice or right path. Remember the children's magazine Highlights? As a kid, my favorite part of the magazine was the picture that had hidden items in it you had to find. The shoe, the apple, the baseball bat. Wisdom literature claims that if you search for the good path, you can find it. It's in the puzzle.

The problem, as Solomon's own life eventually illustrated, is that sin, the evil within us, makes it harder and harder to find the good. And here again is the leader's real dilemma. What is the good choice in the Middle East? What is the good choice in your own home? The puzzle has been too complicated by our hurt and our sin. We just can't find clear choices anymore.

Eventually, we became so blind to the good path that the wisdom of God had to break back into the world as a person who finds us. A couple of weeks ago, we celebrated that event in the birth of Jesus. Luke concludes the infancy narrative by telling us, "the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him." With that little verse, Luke depicts Jesus as the embodiment of the good from heaven.

Jesus is not a teacher of information, telling us what to believe. Nor is he a teacher of morals, telling us how to behave. More than that, Jesus is the wisdom of God, the good path from heaven to earth on which evil is transformed into good.

So as a leader, your first priority is not to make changes. Your first priority is to ask Jesus Christ to make changes in you, transforming the evil within your own life into good. Then you, as a leader, can become a symbol of the good path the rest of us are trying to find.

Almighty God, be gracious to our seeking of leaders, who not only lead in the right path, but who embody the goodness of heaven through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.