

THE GIFT OF DISCERNMENT

"Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people?"

I Kings 3:9.

The life of Solomon is very instructive. It is easy to gather from the brief record of his life that when he ascended the throne of Israel he was a youth of brilliant gifts, great intellectual powers, praiseworthy ambitions and marvelous sympathy. He stood on the topmost pinnacle of human felicity, having youth, prosperity, wealth, greatness and glory.

Solomon was great in everything he did. When he sinned, he was great in sin. When he worshipped, he was great in worship. Good and evil strangely met and battled in his life. He was a great engineer and a great architect. He was a great inventor and an outstanding politician. "To be as wise as Solomon" remains a proverb to this day. Even today we are only re-discovering many things which Solomon knew long ago.

Even though Solomon was not more than twenty years of age, for some years he had looked forward to the moment of his coronation. He had been intoxicated with the dazzling prospect -- the power and prestige of kingship, the glitter and the glory of the throne. But now that it had come to him, somehow the romance was fading and he was face to face with the responsibilities of his office. The tremendous responsibility of governing a great country pressed heavily on the young man and filled his heart with solicitude. He knew that he would have to make decisions that would affect thousands of his subjects -- decisions between policies, between people and between peace and war. He realized that the direction of the destinies of Israel required that wisdom which God alone could bestow.

After becoming king, one of Solomon's first acts was to go to Gibeon, the place of national worship, for the express purpose of worshipping God. There he placed a thousand burnt offerings on the altar as a sacrifice unto the Lord. What an act of devotion! Solomon's whole nature seemed to be on fire with devotion as he engaged in those religious services that day.

When Solomon went to bed that night, his brain was still dizzy with the thronging impressions of that thrilling day and the wheels of thought were whirring at a mad speed. His mind was simply filled with thoughts of the God of his parents and of the people over whom he had come to reign. That was only the natural response of a conscientious man when he was thrust into a position of power. When sleep came at last, it was filled with visions of the day's ceremonies and fantastic with thoughts of all that might have been. We are not surprised to learn that when Solomon fell asleep the subject of his waking thoughts was renewed and continued. What is with us in our waking thoughts is often with us in our dreams.

In the midst of his dream that night God appeared to Solomon. The appearance of God lies at the base of all divine revelation. The communication between God and man is always initiated from the Godward side. God frequently appears to His people, to the view of their faith. He wants to reveal Himself to us. He desires to disclose His will for our lives.

One of the most wonderful things in life is the fact that God speaks to us. Although we cannot see Him, we can hear His voice. God appeared to Solomon and offered him his choice of blessings from the divine storehouse. In His offer to give Solomon anything he might desire, God said, "Ask what I shall give thee." In other words, God was saying, "What do you want?"

In his noble response to the divine offer Solomon set us a worthy example. It may seem strange to you that, when God made His unusual offer to Solomon, the first thing that came to his mind was the memory and image of the character and life of his father. Heavenly and human wisdom combined to make him look back and see what his father had meant to him and had done for him and for others. Solomon did not indulge in great praise or in great depreciation of David. Some young people frequently exaggerate the good or the bad in their fathers or mothers, but Solomon did not do either the one or the other. Flippant young people today often say, "Oh, our parents are just old fogies! What do they know? They are just back numbers. This is our world and we are going to make it like we want it." Young people, beware of that spirit of contempt for those who are older than you. Never despise your parents, or their religion. They know what life means and you have that to learn yet.

Solomon expressed his gratitude to God saying, "Thou hast shewed unto thy servant David my father great mercy." He recognized that God had guided in his yesterdays and made him what he was. He said, "O Lord my God, thou hast made thy servant king." He admitted that he was where he was and what he was by God's marvelous grace. In many respects Solomon had enough to make him proud. He was at the age when no one thinks the least of himself, about twenty. He was strikingly handsome, immensely rich, highly flattered and readily obeyed. However, he realized that so far as ability and wisdom for his task were concerned that he was "but a little child." Like all great men who have ever lived, Solomon had a spirit of humility.

What an offer he received! Anything could be his for the asking. That moment of decision was to have a tremendous effect for good or ill on all the rest of his life.

There were many things which Solomon might have requested. He might have asked for pleasure, long life, fame, prosperity, riches, happiness, success and glory. It is only natural for people to want happiness, honor, renown, success, prosperity and wealth. But Solomon did not ask for any of these things.

Had Solomon been like many others, he might have exalted himself in his own esteem as being quite sufficient to rule the people. Instead of taking that attitude, Solomon minimized himself, magnified the people and cast himself on the wisdom and power of God. In profound seriousness he recognized the greatness of the task which had been assigned to him. With becoming modesty and delightful earnestness, he acknowledged the limitations of his abilities and their utter inadequacy for the task. His spirit was highly commendable.

Unfortunately there are many who never regard life as a solemn trust. They never realize how serious it is to live and to die. Regardless of the type of work in which they are engaged, they never have any sense of personal insufficiency, or any consciousness of the need of God.

Solomon asked God for the great gift of discernment for the tremendous business of living. That was what he desired more than all else. With a great longing to rule well the people of God, Solomon requested the wisdom to do what was just in judgment and equitable in law. His request was for the welfare of others rather than for any personal advantage to himself. He said, "Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people?"

Thus Solomon asked God for the ability to discern between the good and the bad. These words "good" and "bad" are being squeezed out of the vocabulary of the average American today. We are losing touch with the distinction between them. For the word "good" we are substituting such words as "pleasant," "well-adjusted" "well-rounded" and

"helpful." For the word "bad" we are substituting such words as "unpleasant," "disturbed" and "maladjusted." What our grandparents called "a bad boy," we call "a maladjusted juvenile delinquent." Many have come to believe that "good" and "bad" mean little more than "I like it" and "I don't like it." Some tell us that "good" and "bad" are really no more than grunts of approval or disapproval. Frequently a college boy or girl, who has heard some teacher speak with a note of final authority in some field of study in which he has never even had a course, will say that there is no absolute good or bad -- only shades of opinion, varying from place to place and from year to year. If you should press the student with the question: "Are you sure there are no absolutes?", he will say, "Yes." Then, if you ask him, "Are you absolutely sure?", he will not have an answer.

Here is the choice: to limit ourselves to our own concerns, ambitions and plans, or to seek the understanding mind and heart, the mind that is sensitive to the conflict between good and bad, and the heart that is sensitive to the needs of others. "Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart."

If you were going to ask God for what you desire the most, what would it be? Some would ask for beauty. Some would ask for pleasure. Some would ask for fame. Others would ask for riches. Still others would ask for happiness. Multitudes think that the chief end of life is to be happy. Most parents want their children to be happy above all else. They put happiness before usefulness and godliness. If we were going to ask God for what we want most, how many of us would ask Him for wisdom, or for the ability to discern between good and evil?

It is interesting to note that because Solomon asked for wisdom God gave it to him, but to it He added honor, riches and victory over his enemies. God gave him wisdom to discern between good and evil because he asked for it, but at the same time He gave him honor, riches and victory because he did not ask for them. His choice of the higher proved that he was qualified to be entrusted with the lower. This goes to show that if we will ask God for grace to do our work and to fulfill our mission in life, He will see to it that we shall not want for life's necessities. Christ taught that those who are concerned chiefly with doing God's will need not have any anxiety about lower things. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33). If God feeds the birds, He will see to it that you, His obedient child, will not go hungry. If He clothes the lilies, He will clothe you. If He gives life, He will supply the meat that is less than life.

If you do not feel the need of an understanding heart, may it not be due to the fact that you refuse to look your responsibilities in the face? It is a serious matter to live aright, but for a person not to care for and not to request an understanding heart indicates that his life will be a curse instead of a blessing. Perhaps you would say that everyone desires an understanding heart. Each may desire an understanding heart, but everyone will not choose it. There is a difference between desiring and choosing. If you were to ask many young people, "Do you choose to be educated?", they would readily reply, "Certainly, I choose to be educated." But, in reality, they do not. They desire to get an education, but their desires never ripen into choices. When many who desire to become educated see that a choice to do so will involve self-denial and drudgery, they prefer to put it off and to take the consequences.

A young man desires to be rich, but as soon as he finds that gaining wealth requires self-denial and painstaking industry he does not choose riches. Instead, he chooses pleasure and self-indulgence; he chooses the present and lets the future take care of itself. Anybody can desire, but it is a wise person who chooses. In the same way, many desire to obey Christ and expect some day to do so, but they do not choose to have in them the mind of Christ or an understanding heart to discern between good and

evil. They are not willing to take the necessary steps to have it. They are not willing to put forth the exertions that are necessary in order to be truly obedient Christians. It is easy to desire, but it is difficult to choose.

Life, with all its wealth of opportunity, stands before you and asks you to choose. What do you want? Why do you want it? What will you pay for it? The choice of a career is important, but the choice of a character is more important. You are sometimes called to choose where you will live your life, but you are also asked to choose how you will live it. You certainly need the gift of discernment.

It is good to know the kind of choice that pleased the Lord. God was offering to give Solomon anything he might desire. He asked for that which was good, but he did not ask for the highest and best. Had he done that, he would doubtless have become the greatest citizen of his day. But, alas, he did not ask for the best. He was content with something less than the best. Good as it was, what he asked for was not the best. While it was important that he be a wise judge, it was even more important that he be a good man. It would have been better if Solomon had said, "Give me a heart to love Thee supremely and grace to live for Thee gloriously. Let me do Thy will always." Let us see to it that we choose the way of wisdom and walk therein. Let us, too, ask for an understanding heart to discern between good and evil, that we may always choose the good, yea, choose the best.

"What a friend we have in Jesus."