

"IF YOU COULD HAVE ONE WISH"
November 3, 1991

TEXT: 1 Kings 3:5 "At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, 'Ask what I shall give you.'"

In today's scripture we find young King Solomon faced with a momentous decision. A decision by no means uniquely his own, but one we all must make again and again. A decision so crucial that the course of our lives and the future of our world depend on it.

Shortly after he became king, Solomon had gone to the ancient shrine at Gibeon to worship God, seeking help that he might govern well. And, while there, God appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Ask what I shall give you." What a fantastic opportunity! And what an awesome temptation!

Many of us pray rather casually, taking no responsibility for our prayers. Perhaps we doubt that prayers are really answered. Or, at very least, we expect God to screen them and give us only what is good for us and for others. But here we find Solomon, probably not yet twenty, being offered what is virtually a blank check. If you were Solomon what would you do?

Suppose God were to say to you, as He said to Solomon, "I will grant you one wish. Anything you want I will give it to you. Any thing your heart desires you can have --except more wishes." What would your ask for?

Would you ask something for yourself? Perhaps it would be money. After all, there are so many things one can do with money. And not just selfish things either. Things we could do for others: for our children, for our friends, for worthwhile causes. There would be many who ask for that.

And some, perhaps, would ask for power. Think of what one could do with power. Power to make people do what you want. Power to change unjust laws and institution. Power to recreate the world so that life for all would be happier and more fulfilling. I am pretty sure some would ask for power.

Some would ask for things like fame and social position. And others might ask for long life and good health. Maybe that is two wishes, but they seem to go together. Still others would ask for happiness, though that might mean different things to different people. And some might use their wish for others: healing for someone who is sick, a second chance for someone in trouble, an end to some problem plaguing the life of a friend.

Or they might ask for something more general. They might ask for peace, not just for themselves or their friends, but for the world. Think of it, the chance to end the fighting and the killing once and for all. No, more than that, to put an end even to the threat of war, so the whole world might use its resources to build and not destroy. I know people who would ask for that.

And others might ask for justice. They might reason that peace without justice is no peace at all, that true justice would bring peace in its wake. They would pray for an end to discrimination in all its forms, for the establishment of laws and institutions that protect the powerless and nurture the needy. Surely the world would be a better place if only that prayer for justice could be answered.

And there would be those who would ask for love. They would agree with that old Connie Francis song, "What the world needs now is love, sweet love. That's the only thing that there isn't plenty of." They might argue that, if there were really love in the world, there would also be justice, and peace, and happiness. If they could have one wish, they would ask for love.

Now, none of these things would be bad. Like any loving parent, surely God wants His children to be healthy and happy, to have their reasonable share of wealth, and power, and success. Without them there would be only poverty, weakness, and failure. No parent wants that for his or her children. And surely God wants peace, and justice, and love for the world.

There is nothing wrong with any of these things. But none is right either, not right enough. The message of this morning's scripture is that, good as any of those answers might be, Solomon's was better. Faced with the chance to have anything he wanted, Solomon did not ask for wealth, or power, or good health. He did not ask for peace, or justice, or love. He said, "Give, therefore, Thy servant an understanding mind to govern Thy people that I may discern good from evil."

And that answer pleased God, who said, "Because you have asked this and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or the life of your enemies . . . behold I do according to your word. Behold I give you a wise and discerning mind . . . I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor . . . And if you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes . . . then I will lengthen your days."

Now, if Solomon's prayer --and God's answer-- seem a bit strange to you, it might help to know that our English translation is a little misleading. Wisdom is a great virtue, to be sure, but that is not what Solomon meant. What the Hebrew really says is not "an understanding mind" but "a hearing heart. And, in Solomon's day, the heart was considered the seat, not just of the intellect, but of the will and the emotions as well. Today we might call it the core of the existential being. And wisdom always meant something spiritual, not just intellectual.

So the Psalmist wrote, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God . . .'" (Psalms 14:1) And Jeremiah pronounced God's complaint, "For my people are foolish, they know me not" (Jeremiah 4:22)

What Solomon asked was for more than wisdom. He asked for a heart, mind, and soul so thoroughly attuned to God that he would be able to know and do God's will. And God replied that He would grant that wish and, in so doing, would open the way for wealth, justice, and peace to follow. In the same way, Jesus later said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

The message of this story is that harmony with God is more important than things like wealth or power, more desirable than health or happiness, more worthy than peace or justice. Moreover, harmony with God is the only way we can ever have or long retain these other things.

Many of you have probably been to a symphony concert. And you know that, before an orchestra begins to play, the oboe player sounds an A, and all the others tune their instruments to that note. Well, just as an orchestra has harmony only when every instrument is in tune, so you and I have true health and happiness, legitimate wealth and power, lasting peace and justice only when we are in tune with God.

Now, a few minutes ago I began this sermon by saying that Solomon's choice was not uniquely his own, that it was one all of us face again and again. Day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, you and I must decide what we will spend ourselves upon, what we will pursue with the time, and the energy, and the talents God has given us. And, as we make those choices, we demonstrate our priorities just as surely as if we had to make one wish.

Will we spend ourselves on wealth or power? Will we spend ourselves on helping others, or on peace and justice? Or, like Solomon, will we first bring ourselves into harmony with God? Will we seek God's kingdom and His righteousness so that God's power and God's love can flow through us to bring forth good --for us, for others, and for the world? Upon that choice, that ever recurring choice, depends not only the course of our own lives, but the future of our world.