

Proper 15 B  
1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14  
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“The Burden of Wisdom”  
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*Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David . . . So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established . . . At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, ‘Ask what I should give you.’ And Solomon said, ‘You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because 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. And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?’ It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, ‘Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.’*

A man stumbled across an old oil lamp in his work office. He started polishing it with a cloth and out popped a genie. The genie explained to him that he would receive three wishes, and whatever he wished for, his boss would get double. For his first wish, the man said, “The first thing I want is a billion dollars.” The genie replied, “Okay, but you know that your boss will get two billion.” “For my second wish,” the man continued, “I’d like a large house on a remote tropical paradise.” The genie replied, “Then your boss will have two beautiful houses.” “For my third wish, the man concluded, “I want you to donate one of my kidneys.”<sup>1</sup>

I can’t help but think that the story from I Kings is a bit like getting wishes from a genie. The author tells us that God appeared to the newly minted King Solomon in a dream and told him to ask for anything. Solomon’s request for wisdom to govern the people rightly made God so pleased that God made Solomon the wisest person who ever lived and gave him incomparable riches and honor to boot! Not bad...

Legends, myths, and stories of Solomon’s extraordinary wisdom and wealth abound – from his fabled diamond mine, to the lavishness of his empire, to his shrewdness in governing. But many stories also claim that he received special power to communicate with animals and to control spirits. In fact, one story in the collection *The Thousand and One Nights* tells that one particularly contrary spirit, a genie, had so angered Solomon that he bound him up in a copper vessel, sealed the opening with his own seal of lead, and cast it into the sea. The genie languished there for 1800 years until he was released by an old fisherman.<sup>2</sup> There’s more of a connection to my genie joke earlier than you realized!

Tradition attributes numerous writings to Solomon including the biblical books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. Solomon occupies a place of honor as a prophet in the Islamic and Baha’i faiths. And Solomon

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<sup>1</sup> Rachael Rosel. “Three Hilarious Jokes About Genies Granting Wishes,” Startsat60.com, April 10, 2020: <https://startsat60.com/media/lifestyle/jokes/3-hilarious-jokes-about-genies-granting-wishes>.

<sup>2</sup> *The Thousand and One Nights*. Bartleby.com: <https://www.bartleby.com/lit-hub/hc/stories-from-the-thousand-and-one-nights/the-story-of-the-fisherman/>.

is viewed as the progenitor of the Ethiopian royal line from a child with the Queen of Sheba. Biblical scholars, historians, and archeologists disagree over the details of Solomon's life and reign, but his cultural impact and legacy can hardly be denied.

Despite his wealth and wisdom, though, the biblical portrait of Solomon shows a man who, like his father David, was deeply flawed. He brutally secured his position by slaying his own brothers. While he is attributed with the construction of the great Temple, the fortification and beautification of Jerusalem, and the economic prosperity of his kingdom, much of it was built on the backs of enslaved people. And his desire for alliances and pleasures led to a harem of 1,000 wives and concubines. To please them all, the biblical record tells that he also constructed temples to their deities and prayed and sacrificed with them there. Ultimately, Solomon's lack of faithfulness led to the downfall of a unified kingdom of Israel and Judah and Solomon's son, his heir, would be left with a kingdom only a fraction the size of his father's. Wisdom alone, can only do so much. One must also be willing to follow it.

The author of Ecclesiastes, traditionally Solomon himself, wrote:

I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. I said to myself, 'I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.' And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

These do not sound like the words of a person who is on top of the world. No, they are instead the words of one whose wisdom has inspired defeat instead of action. Wisdom can be a burden. Once something is known, is understood, one must either live with the knowledge or live to change it. There is no going back to a state of not knowing.

We find ourselves amidst the great age of information with easier access to knowledge than any generation in the history of the world. If we choose to, we can learn about anything from micro farming, to global warming, to international affairs, to trends in the 21<sup>st</sup> century American church. Knowledge, though, is not the same as wisdom. Wisdom is interpreting the knowledge. But wisdom isn't enough in and of itself to make the world a better place. One must choose either to live with what wisdom teaches is and is coming, or choose to live to change what wisdom teaches is and is coming. For wisdom to change the world, it must be coupled with the courage to act, the willingness to risk, and the desire not simply for what is, but what can be.

And that is the invitation to us: to choose knowledge over ignorance, to choose wisdom over foolishness, to choose action instead of defeat. May we have the courage that Solomon seems to have lacked – the courage to couple wisdom with action for the sake of ourselves, this church, and our world. Amen.