

1 Kings 3:5

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[0 : 00] We shall turn again to 1 Kings chapter 3, reading at verse 5. 1 Kings chapter 3 and verse 5.

In Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, Ask what I shall give thee.

Amen. It may be that some of us have pondered the possibility of being told that we may wish for any one thing and be assured of getting it.

And there are moments in both legend and history when men have had this kind of privilege. And maybe like the narrative suggests, we might have given the opportunity to ask for wealth, for the Midas touch.

[1 : 26] We might ask for length of days. We might ask for prosperity in our own social lives, prestige, influence.

We might even, as the narrative suggests, ask for revenge and triumph over opponents and foes. We find that Solomon was given this opportunity by God himself in a totally historical and matter-of-fact way.

The Lord says, ask for money. The Lord says, ask what I shall give thee. Ask one thing, and you shall have that one thing.

Ask one thing, and you shall have that one thing. In many ways, a great test of the man himself. And if it was a test, then it's one which Solomon passes with flying colors.

[2 : 31] because what he chooses meets with God's total approval. He asks God for wisdom.

We find in verse 9 that Solomon says to God, Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart. That was what he prayed for.

He might have had anything he wanted. But he chose out of all the options, he chose wisdom. Now I want for a moment tonight to explore this situation, to explore this choice that Solomon made.

Consciously I speak to many who are students, involved in academic questions and intellectual pursuits, and those pursuits themselves lying very close often to the whole area of wisdom.

And yet wisdom is something that is far broader than the mere cultivation of the intellect. It is more than information.

[3 : 53] It's more than sharp, logical power. It's more than literary creativity. It's more than being cultured. You remember James VI, how he was called the wisest fool in Christendom because he had so much learning.

And yet with all that learning was often at least deemed, not always fairly, to be divided of practical common sense.

And surely as we ponder tonight, all the stresses and pitfalls of our own existence, as we contemplate the number of choices, of dilemmas, of crises, that we are destined to face.

Surely it were well for us to make this great choice of Solomon's role and to ask from God above all else the gift of an understanding heart.

Ask what one thing I shall give thee. And this great answer, the one thing which I want above all, because I need it above all, is an understanding heart.

[5 : 33] Lord, give me wisdom. While if that's all, let's explore for a moment what exactly this might mean. In other words, the different areas in which this wisdom is so necessary.

It is necessary, first of all, in connection with our own daily lives and our own daily calling. You will notice that Solomon sets his request very, very carefully in the context of his own, what I may call professional responsibilities.

He says to the Lord in verse 7, I am not a little child.

I know not how to go out or come in. And thy servant is in the midst of thy people which thou hast chosen. A great people that can't be numbered nor counted for multitude.
It is his sense of his own inadequacy in the presence of the ordinary burdens of his calling.
[6 : 56] It is in his profound sense of that that Solomon utters this prayer to God. God is in the work to which God has called him.

He is bearing a well-defined responsibility. He knows the parameters of his own job. He knows the greatness of his task.
He knows the limitations of his own resources. And what he prays for bears in the directest possible way upon his own daily responsibilities.

Now, of course, for us, we face a very much more limited sphere. Our own callings, our own relationships, the management even of our own temperaments.
They seem as nothing in comparison with the burdens which Solomon bore. And yet, even in the face of the demands of our own day-to-day lives, our own professions, our own jobs, don't we need to make our own this prayer of Solomon's?

[8 : 24] However elementary or mundane our routine, our monotonous, our lives may seem to us to be. All of us know that frequently we're at the end of our own resources.

We're at the end of the tether of our own talents, our own resilience, our own aptitudes, so often facing problems which are too large for ourselves.
others. Now, wisdom in the Old Testament is an intensive practical thing. It doesn't belong to universities and classrooms and colleges.
it belongs to men's ordinary pursuits. There, in their personal relationships, in their daily avocations, in the temptations incidental to their own daily lives, there they have to find this great thing called wisdom.

And surely, it is the same with ourselves. for example, we need, as we enter upon our own callings, a firm grasp of the great biblical principles of conduct.

[9 : 43] No matter what our spheres are going to be, for our own relationships, for our own callings, we need to know God's principles of conduct.

There is no use of man that we can go into life, enter the factory or the school or wherever, and discover the principles as we go along. We have to know the great principles to guide us before we assume those burdens and face what are often overwhelming temptations.

We go in armed with the wisdom that knows that God wants us to love the Lord our God with all our hearts. and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

And how many crises and failings would we avoid if we were to apply in our own routine a wisdom as elementary as that?

And we know further more from God's word the outworkings and implications of those two fundamental principles, sanctity of truth, the sanctity of life, the sanctity of a man's reputation, of marriage, the sanctity of property, of God's name, of the Lord's day.

[11 : 11] We go into our professions armed with a firm grasp of those great sanctities. and whatever the pressures, however plausible, may be the solicitations with which we applied, we shall say, no, I have come in with a wisdom that knows that truth is sacred, and I shall not buy promotion at the expense of truth, or at the expense of another man's reputation, or at the expense of violating the sanctity of the Lord's day when I don't have to, or at the expense of becoming covetous and ambitious in a worldly sense, or at the expense of being prepared to compromise my home, my family, my marriage.

These are all dreadfully elementary. And yet that is where wisdom begins. The wisdom that says, wherever I go, I shall love my neighbor, who may be my superior, or may be my inferior, or my equal, or my rival, or my friend, or my enemy, or my competitor, but I shall love him as myself. And I shall make that principle my fundamental and guiding principle in all my dealings. And I shall observe those great sanctities which God has revealed.

In other words, I go in not with a conscience which is totally open, and totally bendable and pliable, going in exploratory, but I go into my life, my career, with a fundamental set of guiding principles, because I go in with the wisdom which God has given.

But I go in also, prepared to learn from my own experience, wisdom. Because, again, in the Old Testament, wisdom is seldom a matter of books.

[13 : 46] It is a matter of experience. It's a matter of observing, and a matter of listening, a matter of following, and rising, a matter of new beginnings.

experience, the experience of the instruction of others, the experience of the criticism of others. And I know that so much of that criticism is painful. I know that some of it is malicious, but yet I also know as the matter a proven experience, that it is all helpful, even when it hurts, even when it's unfair, even when it's malicious.

It always is truth, and I must listen to the truth in it, even as it riles me, even as it grieves and irritates.

I must be prepared to listen to what men advise, to what men say and criticism, and prepared to learn from my own mistakes, my own errors.

[15 : 14] One goes in, one makes assumptions, one makes the wrong assumptions, one falls. worse. But how we learn, we go ourselves through the valley of the shadow of death, we meet much that is painful, we don't learn simply because it's painful, it's perfectly possible to go through all the suffering in this world and we none of it better of it.

Unless we prepare to learn from pain, to learn in the pain of our own relationships. We love, we learn in love, more wondrously still we are loved and we learn in being loved and we are hurt and we learn from being hurt and we fall and we learn from folly and we rise and we learn from that too. If we go in with total openness, if we go in guided by God's great principles but still open to the great lessons of our own experience because that is God's discipline.

the people we meet, the opportunities, the temptations, the relationships, the joys, the privileges, the pains, the sorrows, so that in a great way we have never arrived and we never cease growing and we never cease maturity because our pores are open and we swallow up God's discipline and education the way the whale imbibes the plankton.

It comes in, we take it in, simply because we are moving through this valley of the shadow of death. And the most terrible thing is to go into any situation with a closed mind world.

[17 : 39] In the imagination that we must make ourselves proof against this culture or against this experience.

We have personalities which are not static. They're not meant to stand still. If God spares me, it is my great hope that I shall learn and learn and learn and shall be as different in 20 years' time from what I am tonight as what I am tonight is from 20 years ago.

And that difference is in many ways monumental. And it can only come about because we are ourselves open to all the messages and all the pressures and all those influences that God in his providence brings to bear upon us.

And so we're asking God to give us the wisdom of first principles but also to give us the wisdom of experience. But Solomon was asking for more.

he was asking for God to indwell his mind. Solomon wouldn't have put it that way.

[19 : 09] I would put it perhaps in a New Testament form where the Lord himself promises his disciples that in moments of crisis it will be given them in that hour what is speak.

don't worry he says what you shall say. It is absolutely pointless to try to mention beforehand every single crisis and go into them with a prepared technology and with rehearsed answers because life is far too complicated.

you can't go in with ground rules you can't go in with all the instincts born in experience but then you are suddenly every day faced with a new situation.

You've never met it before. Now you find that so lovely so beautifully in the story itself in 1st Kings chapter 3. no sooner the solemn asked this great request added to God than he faces this great dilemma with those two women each claiming maternity maternal rights over this particular child. He couldn't have foreseen it. He had his ground rules had his experience but you see at once that the solution doesn't come out of the ground rules it doesn't come out of past experience it comes in what is almost a flash of inspiration it comes almost directly and vertically from God himself.

[21 : 05] Now that to me is something of enormous importance. importance it is what the Lord promised his disciples that in the moment of crisis it would be given to them that he would indwell their hearts and intellects and that when those intellects and those hearts were faced with the anomalous and the bizarre and the critical then God himself would give us insight would give us even heightened observation heightened mental efficiency enabling us to see in and through situations which in themselves would be beyond imagining for which there is no technology God

now the obvious of that is the need for constant dependence on our part on God himself so that I know that no matter how much I've been taught no matter no matter how much I've read no matter how much I've experienced and learned and seen and heard I still can't handle it every day there are things I can't handle I can only respond to them if God is indwelling my intellect I'm not advocating a flash of special revelation because I believe that we have all the revelation that we need in the written scripture but I do believe in the ministry of God's spirit to my intellect so that he will administer illumination and insight and discernment and judgment in moments of crisis in moments and carried beyond the depth and reach of my own experience and I'm coming back then and saying

I'm dealing only with what is mundane what is part of the day to day business of our own lives where we live at work live in our own homes live in the church the way from day to day we manage ourselves and I'm saying that in that area to handle its challenges its opportunities its temptations its stresses its joys its sorrows and above all to manage its relationships we need wisdom we need God's ground rules we need the lessons that experience experience and we need God to indwell our intellect and to give us at every moment of crisis his own special illumination then there is a second area where this wisdom is important and that is in the administration of the church of Jesus Christ now I'm not speaking to clerics I won't make those assumptions but I'm going to assume that the well-being of the body of Christ the prosperity the cohesion the effectiveness of the church of God is something that in the profoundest way matters to every single Christian and I'm saying that in order to the church's effectiveness we need wisdom in large doses I believe that every member of God's church needs wisdom that all its deacons and all its elders need wisdom in a special way that all who lead it and all preach God's gospel that they need wisdom and I believe that that wisdom is charismatic and I believe that one of the most urgent needs of the church of God at the present time is a rich and abiding measure of that wisdom which is from above which is more than education which is more than intellect which is more even than experience which is heavenly in its origin and which is heavenly also in its maintenance and I believe that we should be crying to God for this gift for this great charisma in order to the church's survival we need it in many different areas for example we need it to resolve disputes and differences in the church of God you go back to the situation at Corinth where believers were quarreling over very mundane matters and taking those matters to civil law to let them judge between believers and matters of property and inheritance and so on and Paul is aghast truly in the church of God there is enough wisdom to decide between members of one congregation in matters of that kind don't you have the wisdom to resolve those things among yourselves or do you confess your bankruptcy and go to pagan arbitrators and indicate to them the total breakdown in love between

[27 : 13] Christians and the prevalence in the church of God of all those motives of avarice and covetousness that we find in the church outside the world outside the same jealousies the same envious the same power struggles you go with ease to pagan arbitration surely among yourselves you can find men to settle those disputes I'm sure that in Aberdeen there are no problems of that kind but I can see one great area where there is a need tonight for precisely this wisdom we don't have believers going to law with believers in this congregation but what we do have is this we have branches of the church of Jesus Christ which preach the same faith and have the same inheritance and the same tradition and the same aspirations but they bear different names and they are different legal entities and they are divided and they are at war and they are quarreling there is no cohesion and there is no harmony and there is no cooperation and I am being driven to the view more and more that these things are grievous in the sight of God just as they are radically weakening to our testimony and I'm becoming desperately anxious for the healing of those breaches

I'm not for one moment saying that we should just merge in one great world church but I'm saying look that our reform branches living vital members of the body of Christ Christ and they are competing and they are quarreling and they are slandering one another and surely there there is a need for the wisdom of Solomon to take us back over our prejudices over the legacy of decades of misunderstanding and to unravel these and bring us together again to the glory of almighty God I no longer think it's peripheral it is something of monumental importance to the church of God and yet the problems are such I mean the small problems of relationships and temperament and those terrible quirks in human nature that is going to need such tremendous wisdom to get any kind of cohesion

God in the last 20 years has done great things for the reformed faith God has raised up a great army of preachers and yet we are all pulling in different directions and we ourselves in Scotland are as divided as ever over declaratory acts over the national covenant over psalms and tims and organs and I refuse to believe that any of these things in itself are all of these things together has the right to keep branches of the church of God separate if they hold the head if they adhere to Christ the living body and I am saying that we need wisdom to deal with that kind of situation wisdom to dream it wisdom to see it wisdom to attempt it wisdom to negotiate it with all its shoulders and all its problems and all its perils and all the church of

God needs wisdom if it's going to counsel its own members because in every congregation going right back to the New Testament there are Christians who are weak in the faith and some are weak in mental health and there are some who are unruly they don't live within the rules that God has laid down and those brethren those sisters they are yet authentic Christians they need counsel they need comfort they need admonition they need confrontation they need advice and where is it going to come from it's going to come from those who are wise not only from the pastors but from the elders and not only the elders but the whole church of God you go back to first the

Lord is five and Paul says brethren you deal with them with the unruly and with the feeble minded and with the weak not the psychiatrist not the minister not the elder but all the brethren all the brethren in his collective wisdom we should be able to relate to one another's problems in that way now what I'm saying is dreadfully dangerous and I'm terribly conscious of that I don't want meddling I don't want busybodies poking their fingers into other people's business and I don't want anybody oblivious to the terrible dangers involved in face to face person to person counseling especially across sexual barriers and so far as possible it should be done by members of the same sex but I'm still wanting to push the point that the church of

[33 : 48] God should be able to handle its own problems the problems of its own members that we should have the collective wisdom to strengthen the weak to reclaim the unruly and to bring to mental peace and cohesion those who have some of the more common problems of being meant to be defective and so on and so forth I know that beyond that there is an area that demands professional attention and I don't want anybody again meddling there beyond their own competence but we need the wisdom of God as a collective entity in order to count and admonish the members of our own congregations but I have in mind something more the church needs wisdom to unite those who quarrel it needs wisdom to counsel its own members but I think too that tonight the church of God needs wisdom to plan its own strategy because we face this maybe we have always faced a crisis that threatens our very existence

I don't speak of one denomination but of the church of God in this land and I find scattered here and there glorious manifestations of the body of Christ vital vibrant united spiritual dynamic churches I meet here and there godly ministers and great preachers I see and hear here and there great visions and great dreams and yet when I look over all I see nothing or I see confusion I see that we live within the thumb lines of our own inheritance we have churches where there used to be churches we preach the kinds of sermons that men used to preach we have the same ministries as the church used to have and we seem to have no strategy we seem to live from day to day unable to manage even our material and our financial affairs in any coherent way we stumble on from one 12 months to another we are uncertain as to what is a call to the ministry or who should be admitted to the ministry or how men should be trained for the ministry or where once they are trained they ought to be placed and I'm saying that surely the time has come for one two three for some men to say stop and look to ask what is the totality of the situation what is the object of this exercise what are the fundamental principles what are the aspirations what is the national situation what is the international situation what is this 20th century what are we trying to do no I'm not saying that somewhere you appoint an official to do this

I'm not saying that somewhere you find a committee to do this I'm not saying that somewhere you find somebody to do this I'm speaking of charisma I'm speaking of the sovereign gift of God and I'm saying let us plead to the living God let us say to him Lord your word says if any man lack wisdom let him ask of God and my whole church lacks wisdom and my whole generation lacks wisdom Lord give us wisdom the wisdom that takes a broad view and a far view and the overview and international view Lord give us that it cannot come out of academy out of experience out of training it can only come out of the sheer vertical sovereign grace of God and I urge that we should go to

God collectively and say Lord we're in a dark tunnel we're in a cool sack a few days ago a high wish and by wish conference in a few weeks Lord a general assembly after that the same treadmill of committees all of it necessary all of it necessary much of it useful but it's all tactical it's all limited it is not strategic it hasn't the creativity of the wisdom from above and I'm saying look the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream and said ask what I shall give thee and I put it to you tonight

God is saying that to me and to you on behalf of the whole church of God in this land and I'm saying please ask for wisdom give therefore thy servant an understanding heart that's what we need I must move on to one final note and that is this the wisdom of which the book of Proverbs speaks when it says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom I need wisdom for my daily life I need wisdom for the church of God but above all I need wisdom in my relations with God and the precise form of wisdom which is this that fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom a wise man is afraid of God a wise woman is afraid of God what does it mean it means that no wise man lightly runs the risk of God's correction and God's chastisement

[42 : 06] God's and when we trifle with sin and when we're on the risk of temptation and apostasy deliberately then we say to ourselves look you're a fool because you're on the risk of the wrath of God you know people have made a colossal error with regard to this whole problem of God's wrath because they've assumed God's wrath is for the reprobate and God's wrath is about hell and God's wrath is about a lost eternity you go to the Bible use any concordance and you will find an astonishing fact that for the most part it is God's people who are the objects of God's wrath it was with Israel God was angry and I'm saying tonight that a

Christian who is a wise man is afraid of the displeasure of God as many as I love I'll reprove and chisel and if we could get ourselves honed in on that terrible reality we wouldn't trifle or play with sin as we often do but it also means this the wise man is afraid of the final judgment of God and I would put that tonight especially to those of you who for some reason or another are not Christians Christians to me I must confess it's a remarkable fact that you're not Christians it's remarkable because it seems that all of you believe in God and all believe in the Bible as the word of God I can understand the atheistic Christian I can't understand Christians who are able people who believe this book to be God's book people who know that God's in this heaven and yet you've done nothing about it I'm saying the wise man and the wise woman is afraid of the judgment of God the lowest thing we shall all appear before the judgment seat of God face to face eyeball to eyeball some of you can look the minister in the eye why not why not human beings not always themselves worthy of much respect it's quite something else to look

God in the face to look the consuming fire to look him in the eye to defy and to argue so the wise man is afraid of the judgment of God now I would really want to say to you I believe that God will listen to every excuse you have that he will carefully weigh every plea that you made and he will assess every mitigating factor I believe that God will judge you most graciously and that he will count to your credit everything he can possibly find and I also believe that your punishment will be no more severe than he can avoid because it is the judgment of omniscience that God knows every disadvantage from which you suffered including the bad church you went to and the bad preaching that you heard he knows every single mitigating factor and yes I say well you can you can measure them and you can evaluate them and you can work out for yourself tonight

I assure that they all come to a very good excuse and I'm almost asking well when you have weighed up honestly the way it's been the way you've gone the choices you've made and taken you weigh those up and then throw into the balance all the mitigating factors that you know so well because no one knows them better than you do and you rehearse it to yourself constantly everything in your own favour do it honestly do it religiously do it meticulously and put in every faithful favourable consideration and I'm still asking can you go to the great white throne face to face with God unafraid confident that you got an excellent case

[47 : 58] I am told although I know it only at a distance that no matter how good your case is in law there is always the possibility that your litigation may fail because even in human terms a good case doesn't in itself guarantee a favourable verdict and many a man and woman has gone to law with tremendous confidence now that often happens in human terms because of incompetencies and incongruities in a legal system but what I'm wondering is whether your confidence in your case I'm really asking you almost this would you take the case that you hope to present to God could you take that case confidently to the court of session and would you be perfectly safe and secure tonight in the knowledge that if your life depended on that case as presented to those great

impartial lawlords you could sleep easy are you absolutely sure that you have a good case now I'm not going to attempt to divide the sheep from the goats

I think that to a large extent in our tradition those distinctions have become very confused and very blurred I'm asking everyone communicants non-communicants members adherents let's ponder it how good is our case knowing that God will duly evaluate every mitigating circumstance it would be wise to come to a settlement out of court in and through the Lord Jesus Christ wisdom fears the correction of God wisdom fears the judgment of God wisdom builds on the rock

Christ said the fool builds on the sand what does it mean not that he built on the wrong foundation but that he heard the word and didn't do it in other words he built his soul security on a foundation of hearing I must hear you wise enough to build on the foundation of doing Christ's word that word that says to you tonight basically one great thing straight is the gate and narrow is the way that leads to life and few there be that find it and that having there heard that says strive to enter in that is what wisdom does it takes God seriously if

God speaks of chastisement I take him seriously if God speaks of eternal judgment I take him seriously if God speaks of a straight gate and a narrow way then I take God seriously what I've come to at last is this that wisdom is quite simply to take God seriously and that's what I'm hoping may be your response to God's great question ask what I shall give thee Lord give me as a minister and give the members of this congregation all over here tonight grace to say in response to that Lord help me to take thee seriously and I will in no wise cast out let us pray the

Lord grant us that our response to thine offer may be tonight give us an understanding heart an understanding heart especially at the point of our relations with thee oh Lord help us to take thee seriously to take even our own convictions about thee seriously the knowledge that thou art that the Bible is thy word that there is heaven to be won and a hell to be avoided Lord help us take thee in all these aspects of thy glory seriously for Jesus sake Amen