

## **What Should I Pray For?**

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Many people, even those who do not go to church are familiar with the phrase “The wisdom of Solomon.” In fact I suspect that some do not even know that he is a person in the Bible. The beginning of this idea of great wisdom stems from today’s reading. There is a bible study method designed by Verna Dozier that suggests we look at three things, what the passage says, why was it recorded and kept, and finally what does it mean for us today. That will be the format for today’s homily.

The opening of 1<sup>st</sup> Kings is all about the establishment of Solomon as the new King of Israel. David has died and sleeps with his ancestors and Solomon must establish himself as the ruler of this rather unruly kingdom. Solomon makes a choice in what type of king he starts out to be. This passage portrays him as one who will follow the rules of the covenant rather than the ways of power. The true wisdom for which he is rewarded is for being faithful to the ways of Israel and makes him subject to the law.

It is this keeping of the covenant for which Solomon is rewarded. The wisdom is a gift to use to interpret and follow the law. Because he has taken this choice, God will further reward him with all the normal benefits of being a king, power, wealth, and fame. He will be granted long life as long as he remains faithful.

Solomon however will soon forget some of the wisdom and will eventually turn into just another king and make many of the same mistakes as his father and grandfather. That however is typical of human nature and if we have learned anything in reading these stories of the first three great kings of Israel we see that they are very human.

Why has this passage been retained is the second question. That is fairly straightforward in that once again a standard for good governance is held up to the people. The message that faithful action is rewarded is a strong theme. This simplistic theology will eventually run smack into the timeless question of why bad things happen to good people. However, we have not reached that point in the theological development of the people of Israel. That wrestle will come hundreds of years later. The important message here is that Solomon has elected to govern according the law given by Moses. Soon Solomon will build the first great temple and firmly establish the cult of temple worship that will still exist at the time of Jesus.

The third question is the really interesting one for us today. What does this passage mean for us today. We certainly do not have a monarchy and we are not a people of

only one religion. However what struck me is that a common question that people ask me are variations on, what do I pray for, how do I pray, am I allowed to pray for and then fill in the blank. Look at what this passage says about that issue.

First of all we need to take a moment and remind ourselves that there is more to prayer than just petitions. Prayer is more than a cosmic shopping list for God to fill for us. That is the first and foremost message of this passage. The catechism states that there are seven principal types of prayer. The principal kinds of prayer are adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession, and petition. In the course of our service this morning we will cover all of these forms. The Gloria and the Sanctus are great examples of adoration and praise. Many of our hymns are prayers of praise and adoration. The vigil light that is lit and sits over the tabernacle is a prayer of adoration. We close the service with a prayer of thanksgiving and aspects of thanksgiving are found in our Eucharistic prayers. The confession and absolution cover penitence. The offertory is a prayer of oblation where we offer our gifts to God. The prayers of the people are full of intercession, asking prayers on behalf of others and petition, which are prayers for our needs and ourselves.

We so often forget that prayer is so much bigger. But then we still have the problem that in prayers of petition and intercession, just what do we ask for? Solomon does not ask for things, but for guidance and wisdom. That should be big clue for us. I use a collect at the end of the prayers of the people that sums up this idea.

Heavenly Father, you have promised to hear what we ask in  
the Name of your Son: Accept and fulfill our petitions, we  
pray, not as we ask in our ignorance, nor as we deserve in our  
sinfulness, but as you know and love us in your Son Jesus  
Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

The underlying theology behind this is that God knows what we need and Jesus assures us that this will be granted. Sometimes we may not know what we need.

This is a problem in a variety of settings, but in particular in the area of healing prayer. Agnes Sanford (a well known writer and healer) writes that she and a large group of her friends prayed long and hard for her husband to survive and recover from what proved to be a fatal illness. After months of suffering she realized that maybe she was praying for the wrong thing. She and her parish were praying that the person would not die; yet she realized that maybe dying was what the best outcome was. It occurred to her that death is the ultimate healing. As the passage in our funeral service says, where pain and sorrow are no more. They changed to praying that he be healed in whatever way was best. Her husband died peacefully within a few days. So to the person who every so often asks me, is it ok for me to pray that the person die, the answer can be yes. By the way, I was asked that question many times this summer. This is hard, but this also begins the process for us of letting the person go, releasing them into the loving arms of God where they can be healed. A truth of hospice ministry is that when the family clings to life, the

person does even if what they really want is to be given permission to die. That permission can be a powerful final gift. Knowing and understanding this is a gift of wisdom comparable to that gift given to Solomon.

A personal story about prayer: Shortly after learning that the rector of the parish I was serving in Massachusetts was planning to retire I met with the deployment person in the diocesan office in Boston. Within two days I found myself a finalist for rector of a parish. I had been encouraged 9 months earlier to apply for this position, but had declined since I had planned to spend at least another two years on Cape Cod. Things moved very quickly and we reached a point where we were talking with the search committee about a start date. I had been praying all along to be the one called. It seemed like it but then there was silence from the search committee for several weeks. I learned that another candidate had popped up and was being pushed by several committee members. Then I realized that what I needed to pray for was discernment to see if this was the right place for me. Ultimately that person was called. So there I sat at my computer starting once again from scratch. I went on line to check out the positions available at the national deployment office. And what do you know there was a parish in the Diocese of Southern Virginia that sounded just right. So here I am today in front of you.

It is that old message that God answers all prayers. Sometimes the answer is yes, sometimes no and sometimes, not now. The key is in how we ask and what we ask for. The greatest gift of the King Solomon story is the prayer for wisdom. In all things and all ways, praying for guidance, discernment and then having enough sense to shut up and listen is the best prayer of all. Then remember to say thank you God or take the time to just sit in the awesome presence of God.