

“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.” (1 Kings 2:10-12)

If we were to read only this brief description of the transition of power from David to Solomon, we would get the impression that this transition occurred quite smoothly. The full story (1 Kings 1-2) gives a much different picture. The transition from David to Solomon was nothing like the transition of one American president to the next, where everything is orderly and mostly civil. Solomon’s ascension to the throne of Israel was marked with palace intrigue, plotting, and multiple murders.

Even though America does not have a royal family, we are familiar with the concept of a dynasty in which the eldest son (or in some cases the eldest daughter) inherits the throne. For instance, Prince Charles of England is often referred to as the heir apparent to the British throne. He is expected to become king upon the death of his mother, Queen Elizabeth.

This practice has a fancy name – it’s called *primogeniture*. But this practice was not firmly established at the time of David. If it had been, David would not have been king as he was not even related to Saul, and Solomon would not have been king because he was not David’s oldest son. So how did Solomon become king?

The Bible names seventeen sons born to David from among his many wives. If we assume they are listed in birth order, Solomon was the tenth son of David. The first-born son, Amnon, was murdered by the third son, Absalom. Absalom later led a revolt against his father David, hoping to make himself king. David’s forces put down the rebellion and Absalom was murdered. Nothing is ever mentioned of David’s second son, Chileab, so we assume that he died in childhood. That means when David comes to the end of his life, his oldest surviving son is Adonijah.

David reigned as king for forty years, so he was perhaps in his late sixties when 1 Kings picks up the story. David had grown feeble in his old age and he had not arranged for a plan of succession, so there was a period of a couple years that was ripe for a power struggle to evolve. As the oldest surviving son, Adonijah assumed that he would succeed his father and he built a coalition of influential leaders who supported him – most importantly David’s general, Joab, and the priest, Abiathar. Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan had other ideas, however. They wanted Bathsheba’s son, Solomon, to be the next king. So they hatched a plot to convince the ailing David to publicly announce that Solomon would be his successor.

There is some ambiguity in the account in 1 Kings. Bathsheba and Nathan go in to David, one after the other, to remind him that he had once sworn that Solomon would succeed him. Now that may indeed have been what David had said, though there is no record of that earlier in the account. It is also possible that Bathsheba and Nathan are simply making this up and putting this idea into the head of an elderly David, now feeble in both body and mind. There is certainly some self-interest here on the part of Bathsheba and Nathan, for they would hold positions of power and influence if Solomon were king, but would be “nobodies” if Adonijah were king.

David accedes to Bathsheba’s and Nathan’s request and issues a public proclamation that the priest Zadok should anoint Solomon as king immediately, and not wait until David’s death. As you might imagine, Adonijah and his supporters, Joab the general and Abiathar the priest, fear for their lives when they hear that David has made Solomon king. They know that Solomon will perceive them as threats and their loyalty will be questioned. They plead for their lives to Solomon and Solomon promises not to kill them, and he keeps that promise – as long as David is alive. David and Solomon are kind of “co-kings” for 2-3 years, but when David dies, Solomon acts to remove any potential threats to his throne. In short order, Adonijah and Joab are murdered and Abiathar is exiled to his hometown. The second chapter of 1 Kings ends with the comment: “So the kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon.”

Now we come to today’s reading, where the LORD God speaks to Solomon in a dream and invites Solomon to ask for what special gift he would like to receive. Solomon is quite self-effacing in his response. He says he is only a “little child” – he is perhaps in his late teens, maybe 20, at this point and already has his first wife, the daughter of the Egyptian pharaoh. But he modestly admits his lack of experience by describing himself as a “little

child” who does not know how to go out or come in – that is, he doesn’t know his way around the tasks of being the head of state and commander-in-chief of the military. So Solomon asks for “an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.”

The LORD God is pleased with Solomon’s request and gives Solomon the gift of wisdom. Solomon’s wisdom becomes legendary, exemplified by the story that follows this passage in which two prostitutes come before him arguing over a baby. Both had given birth to sons, three days apart. In the middle of the night, one mother had accidentally rolled over on her son and smothered him. Now she was claiming that the other woman’s son was hers. Solomon listened to their claims and ordered that the surviving baby be cut in two and half given to each woman. When one woman cried out in horror at the sentence, Solomon identified her as the real mother, for she was willing to give her son up rather than have him be killed. (1 Kings 3:16-28). Because of his legendary wisdom, tradition credits Solomon with writing much of the book of Proverbs, whose short sayings contrast the way of wisdom and the way of folly.

I laid the big word “primogeniture” on you earlier. In giving the gift of wisdom to Solomon, the LORD God uses an even bigger word. The bigger word is “if”. “If” is a big, big word. It signifies that the gift is conditional. God does not simply give Solomon the gift of wisdom so that henceforth everything Solomon does is permeated with God’s wisdom. God says, “If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen you life.” Wisdom is given to Solomon, but the gift is conditional on Solomon walking in God’s ways, living according to God’s will.

If you take time to read the rest of the account of Solomon’s reign, you will find that Solomon has a mixed record on walking in God’s ways. Solomon’s 40-year reign is for the most part marked by peace and prosperity, which is good, we would think. But much of the prosperity for Jerusalem and funding for Solomon’s magnificent building projects come about by high taxes on outlying sections of the country and requiring citizens to participate in forced labor. The inequitable burden of taxes and the forced labor were not wise decisions on Solomon’s part, fomenting unrest that would lead to the break-up of the country upon his death.

Solomon was also apparently an ancient Don Juan. He is claimed to have had 700 princesses and 300 concubines. (1 Kings 11:3) The decision to have that many wives was no doubt driven by something other than wisdom. Many of these wives came from other countries and cultures and brought with them their own religions. Solomon is famous for building the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem, but he also built worship places for his foreign wives and their gods. In doing this, Solomon was certainly not walking in the way of the LORD, and God’s gift of wisdom was not being used.

With all this in mind, I invite you to look at this story of Solomon asking for and receiving the gift of wisdom as a story about stewardship. When we hear the word “stewardship” we often think of it in the narrow sense of being stewards, or managers, of our money. But the concept of stewardship encompasses all of God’s gifts that are entrusted to us – our talents, the environment, our decision-making abilities. God gives us gifts – some held in common by all human beings and others unique to each individual – but the gifts are realized only if they are properly used. Solomon was given the gift of wisdom, but when he ceased to use it properly, neither he nor the people benefited from God’s gift.

I encourage you to do a little inventory of your own gifts and think about how you are using them. Gifts of working with your hands with tools or kitchen utensils. Gifts of teaching, organizing, administration or communication. Gifts of science, medicine, mathematics, or engineering. Gifts of music, painting, photography, or poetry. Gifts of compassion, patience, or wisdom. God has entrusted us with gifts to be used for the common good, and when we use them properly we give glory to God, the giver of the gifts, and we serve our neighbor. The poet Robert Edwards sums up this stewardship emphasis with this little prayer tucked in the middle of the next hymn:

*Now direct our daily labor, lest we strive for self alone;
Born with talents, make us servants fit to answer at your throne.*