

Homiletics Analysis: 1 Kings 3

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

First Kings 3 opens with a brief but telling report of Solomon's political marriage to Pharaoh's daughter and his worship at the high places — the narrator establishes both Solomon's greatness and his vulnerability in a single breath before the chapter's center arrives. The chapter's heart is the Gibeon encounter: the LORD appears to Solomon in a dream and offers him anything he wishes. Solomon's response is remarkable — he does not ask for long life, wealth, or military victory, but for a “hearing heart” (*lev shomea*) to govern God's people justly. The LORD is so pleased that He grants wisdom beyond any predecessor or successor, and then also grants the wealth and honor Solomon did not request. The chapter concludes with a narrative demonstration of Solomon's wisdom in the famous case of the two women claiming the same infant — Solomon's strategy of threatening to divide the child reveals the true mother and leaves all Israel in awe.

The chapter's structure is carefully designed: the framing of Solomon's mixed beginning (vv. 1–3), the dream at Gibeon (vv. 4–15), and the judicial demonstration (vv. 16–28) together form a unified argument. The theological logic moves from what Solomon asked for, to what God gave, to what God-given wisdom actually looks like in practice.

This Text — Intent:

God is seeking, through this passage, to establish that true wisdom begins with recognizing one's own insufficiency before Him and asking for what only He can give. This is not merely a lesson in good leadership or admirable humility — the passage is calling its readers to reorient their fundamental posture toward God: dependence over self-reliance, service over status, others over self. The dream account functions as more than biographical record; it is a mirror held up to every reader who stands before a task larger than their ability. God's lavish response to Solomon's humble request is designed to provoke a question in the reader: what would I have asked for? The judicial conclusion then grounds the abstract in the concrete — wisdom that comes from God looks like this, and God's people recognize it.

Subject Sentence: Solomon asks for wisdom to serve, and God gives beyond what was asked.

Primary Claim: God responds to the prayer of a dependent, others-focused heart with gifts that exceed all self-serving ambition — and He calls every reader to come before Him the same way Solomon came: needy, trusting, asking for what will serve others rather than secure self.

Interpretive Evaluation

The framing verses (vv. 1–3) — mixed signal or standard introduction?

A common interpretive mistake is either to minimize the negative note in vv. 1–3 (Solomon worshipped at the high places; his marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter was politically expedient) or to overweight it so that the entire chapter becomes a cautionary tale rather than a commendation. Some moralistic readings turn Solomon into a flawed hero whose wisdom was already compromised before he began. This misreads the narrator’s purpose. The narrator’s point is not that Solomon was secretly disqualified; it is that Solomon was genuinely a mixed figure from the outset — great in certain ways, compromised in others — which makes the gift of wisdom all the more striking as a gift of grace. The narrator explicitly notes that Solomon loved the LORD and walked in the statutes of David his father (v. 3), qualifying the worship at high places as a recognizable limitation of the era (“the people were sacrificing at the high places, because no house had yet been built for the name of the LORD”). The Reformed reading acknowledges the shadow without letting it swallow the light: God comes to imperfect, mixed-motive worshippers with His grace. This is the pattern across all of Samuel–Kings.

The dream — does receiving revelation in a dream diminish its authority?

Some popular-level readers question whether the Gibeon encounter is authoritative precisely because it came through a dream. This confusion imports a later (and occasionally charismatic/mystical) concern about subjective dream experience back into an Old Testament context where divine dreams were a standard and fully authoritative mode of revelation (cf. Genesis 20:3; 28:12; 37:5; Numbers 12:6). There is no hermeneutical or canonical basis for treating dream-revelation as a lesser category in the ancient Near Eastern context. The text presents this as a genuine divine appearance — *wayye’ra’ ’Adonay ’el-Shelomoh* (the LORD appeared to Solomon) — and the subsequent events confirm its authority by their fulfillment. This concern can be **refuted** directly from the canonical evidence.

Solomon’s request — virtue or strategy?

Some readers — particularly in the Wesleyan/Arminian tradition’s emphasis on sanctified motive and character formation — read Solomon’s request primarily as evidence of his already-formed virtuous character: he asked rightly because he had been formed rightly. There is something to **acknowledge** here: Solomon’s upbringing under David, his awareness of the covenant, and his explicit reflection on David’s faithfulness (v. 6) all

shape the request. But the Reformed reading goes further: the text places the weight not on Solomon's virtue but on God's response to it. The LORD says "because you have asked this and have not asked for yourself long life or riches..." (v. 11) — God's delight is in the asking, and the gifts flow from His grace, not Solomon's merit. The request itself is a form of faith, and the response is a form of grace. The Wesleyan reading **qualifies** correctly but stops short of the text's full claim.

The judicial conclusion (vv. 16–28) — legal procedure or wisdom demonstration?

Some Dispensational and Baptist readings focus on the legal/procedural dimensions of Solomon's judgment as evidence for God-ordained civil institutions, drawing implications for jurisprudence and social order. While this is a legitimate secondary application, it tends to flatten the passage's primary purpose: the narrative is not a model for courtroom procedure but a demonstration that the wisdom God gave actually works — in the hardest cases, with the most vulnerable people (prostitutes, with no witnesses, in an unverifiable dispute), God's gift produces justice that human cleverness cannot. The judicial scene is the proving ground for the Gibeon gift, not primarily a lesson in governance theory.

The Reformed reading: God sovereignly graces a dependent, mixed-motive worshipper with gifts that exceed all natural ability, in direct response to a request shaped by awareness of his own insufficiency and concern for God's people. The passage's primary claim is about the nature of true wisdom (it begins in God, it is given by God, it is directed toward others) and about the God who delights to give it to those who ask humbly.

Key Canonical Support

- **Proverbs 2:1–6** — "For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding." Proverbial theology grounds what 1 Kings 3 narratively demonstrates: wisdom is not achieved but received, and it flows from the LORD directly.
- **James 1:5** — "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him." James draws the direct New Covenant application of the Gibeon principle: the posture Solomon modeled is the posture God still calls for — and the same generosity still governs His response.
- **Matthew 6:31–33** — "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." Christ gives the gospel-form of Solomon's request: those who subordinate their own needs to kingdom priorities discover that God provides for their needs as well. Solomon sought wisdom to serve; God added everything else. The structural parallel is exact.
- **1 Corinthians 1:24–30** — Christ crucified is "the wisdom of God." The Solomonic wisdom narrative ultimately points beyond itself to One in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden (Colossians 2:3); the wisdom God gives to His

people is ultimately grounded in and shaped by Christ, the fulfillment of everything the Solomonic tradition anticipates.

- **1 Kings 4:29–34 / 10:1–9** — The subsequent chapters confirm what chapter 3 promises: the breadth of Solomon’s wisdom and the international recognition it attracts demonstrate God’s faithfulness to His word at Gibeon. The Queen of Sheba’s testimony (“the half was not told me”) is the narrative fulfillment of the Gibeon promise.

Aim: To call readers to come before God with Solomon’s posture — recognizing insufficiency, asking for what will serve others rather than secure self — and to trust that God’s response to such prayer exceeds all self-serving calculation.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Solomon’s marriage alliance with Pharaoh; brings his daughter to the city of David	Political strength secured by human means; shadow introduced immediately
2–3	The people sacrifice at high places; Solomon loved the LORD but also sacrificed at high places	Narrator establishes the mixed condition of early Solomon; love for the LORD is genuine but worship is not yet regulated
4	Solomon goes to Gibeon — the great high place — and offers a thousand burnt offerings	Scale of worship signals devotion; Gibeon was the location of the tabernacle and the bronze altar at this time
5	The LORD appears to Solomon in a dream at night; “Ask what I shall give you”	Divine initiative; the offer is without restriction — a remarkable act of grace
6	Solomon acknowledges God’s great and steadfast love (<i>hesed</i>) shown to David his father	Solomon grounds his prayer in covenant faithfulness, not personal merit
7	Solomon confesses his youth and inexperience: “I do not know how to go out or come in”	Classic idiom for leadership readiness; genuine dependence, not false modesty

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
8	Solomon acknowledges the greatness of the task: “your servant is in the midst of your people... a great people, too many to be numbered”	The weight of stewardship, not the glamour of power, governs Solomon’s self-perception
9	The request: “Give your servant therefore an understanding/hearing heart to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil”	<i>Lev shomea</i> — a listening, discerning heart; the request is entirely other-directed: “your people,” “discern for them”
10–11	The LORD is pleased because Solomon did not ask for long life, riches, or death of enemies, but for discernment	God explicitly names what Solomon <i>did not</i> ask — the contrast between self-serving and other-serving requests is the theological center
12	God grants the request: wisdom so great that none before or after will equal it	Superlative gift in response to humble request; sovereign gift, not earned outcome
13	God also gives what Solomon did not ask: riches and honor beyond any king of his time	The Matthean principle in operation: seek kingdom priorities, receive everything else
14	Conditional promise: long life contingent on walking in God’s ways as David did	The gift of wisdom does not exempt Solomon from covenant faithfulness — obedience still governs length of days
15	Solomon wakes; recognizes it was a dream; returns to Jerusalem; stands before the ark; offers sacrifices; holds a feast	Dream revelation treated as genuine and binding; worship and community celebration follow
16–22	Two women who are prostitutes come before the king; both gave birth; one infant died; each claims the living child	Case constructed to be unverifiable by any normal judicial means — no witnesses, no documents, opposing claims of equal

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
23–25	Solomon states the problem; calls for a sword; commands the living child to be divided	weight Not cruelty but strategy: creating a situation that will reveal the true mother through her own response
26	The true mother's compassion is aroused; she surrenders her claim to save the child; the other woman agrees to division	The sword separates love from possession; maternal love proves itself by willingness to lose
27	Solomon's verdict: give the living child to the first woman — she is the mother	Wisdom works: the unverifiable is resolved through insight into human nature and love
28	All Israel hears the verdict and stands in awe; they perceive the wisdom of God is in Solomon to do justice	The community recognizes the divine origin of the wisdom; the chapter closes with God glorified through Solomon's gift

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–3	Solomon's Mixed Beginning: Strength, Shadow, and Love for the LORD
2	4–15	The Gibeon Dream: The Humble Request and the Lavish Response
3	16–28	The Judicial Proof: Wisdom Demonstrated in the Hardest Case

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Solomon asks for wisdom to serve, and God gives beyond what was asked.

Primary Claim: God responds to the prayer of a dependent, others-focused heart with gifts that exceed all self-serving ambition — and He calls every reader to come before Him

the same way Solomon came: needy, trusting, asking for what will serve others rather than secure self.

Applications

1. Examine what you would have asked for. (*Mind/belief*) God's explicit notice of what Solomon did *not* ask — long life, riches, military victory — functions as a diagnostic for every reader. The passage invites an honest inventory: when you stand before God with a need, what do you reach for first? The answer reveals what you actually believe about where security comes from and what life is for. Solomon's request was shaped by a specific understanding of his role: he existed to serve God's people, not to use God's people as a platform for his own flourishing. Most of us have inverted this, and we pray accordingly. This text calls for a reckoning with the default orientation of our prayer lives.

2. Stop performing competence you do not have. (*Affections/worship*) Solomon's "I do not know how to go out or come in" is not a rhetorical device — it is a description of his actual condition before a task that exceeds him. The passage calls readers to let this confession become their own. The most spiritually dangerous posture before God is the posture of adequacy — the assumption that we can manage what He has placed before us if we try hard enough or learn enough or work harder. The emotional register of this text is not shame but relief: you are not required to be sufficient. You are required to be honest about your insufficiency and ask. The invitation at Gibeon is still open.

3. Pray specifically for wisdom to serve the people in front of you, not merely for wisdom in the abstract. (*Will/behavior*) Solomon's request was concrete: a hearing heart to govern *this* people. Not wisdom as a general intellectual virtue, but the specific capacity needed for the specific task God had given him. James 1:5 quotes this passage in principle: "if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God." But the asking is not generic — it is shaped by the actual relationships and responsibilities before you. Parents, employers, teachers, elders, and friends all carry stewardship responsibility over specific people. This text calls for specific prayer: "Lord, give me a hearing heart for my marriage / my children / my team / my congregation" — not "make me wiser" in the abstract.

4. Let God's lavish response recalibrate what you think generosity looks like. (*Affections/worship*) God does not give Solomon exactly what he asked for; God gives him what he asked for plus everything he did not ask for plus a promise of more. The text is designed to overwhelm the reader with the scale of divine generosity in response to a single humble request. This is not a mechanism — "ask humbly and you will get more" — it is a revelation of who God is: He gives generously to those who ask Him for what serves others. The appropriate affective response is not to file this away as a principle but to be genuinely arrested by it. The God who gave Solomon wisdom, wealth, and honor beyond measure in response to a humble, service-oriented prayer is the same God who, in Christ, has already given us the One in whom all wisdom, wealth, and honor are hidden. Stop living as though the storehouse is locked.

5. Trust that wisdom given by God will be recognizable and will produce justice.

(Will/behavior) The judicial conclusion is not an appendix — it is the proof. Solomon's wisdom actually worked in the hardest possible case, with the most marginalized possible plaintiffs (prostitutes with no social standing and no witnesses), producing justice that had no natural explanation. For those entrusted with judgment — parents making decisions about children, leaders making decisions about teams, pastors making decisions about congregations — this text is a call to expectant trust rather than paralyzed anxiety. Ask for the hearing heart, then act on what God gives. The wisdom He grants is not a feeling of confidence; it is a God-given capacity for discernment that will show itself when tested. Step into the hard cases trusting that the One who gave Solomon what he needed will not be stingy with those who ask Him the same way.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: First Kings 3 is a foundational text for a biblical theology of wisdom, establishing that wisdom is not an intellectual achievement but a divine gift given in response to prayer. The passage establishes a direct connection between the posture of the one asking and the character of the one being asked: God is not stingy but lavish, not calculating but generous, not indifferent to the content of the request but explicitly attentive to its motive and direction. The theological claim embedded in vv. 10–13 is profound: God names what Solomon *did not* ask as the ground of His pleasure, which means God is evaluating not just the content of prayer but the heart that shapes it. The subsequent addition of what Solomon did not ask mirrors the character of God throughout Scripture — He is a giver who exceeds all calculation. The judicial demonstration in vv. 16–28 confirms that this God-given wisdom is not theoretical; it is effective in the most practically demanding contexts, producing justice for the vulnerable that human cleverness cannot secure.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This passage displays the Reformed understanding of grace operating precisely where human inadequacy is honestly confessed. Solomon does not receive wisdom because he has earned it or because his character qualifies him; he receives it because he asked for it in a spirit of dependence, and God is pleased to give what He is asked for in faith. The conditional note in v. 14 (long life contingent on obedience) reflects the covenant structure without undermining the gracious character of the gift — the wisdom itself is unconditionally given; the blessings flowing from it are received within the context of covenant fidelity. The passage also displays the principle that true wisdom begins with the fear of the LORD (Proverbs 1:7) — Solomon's humble self-assessment before God is not strategic positioning but the beginning of wisdom itself. Christologically, Solomon functions here as a type whose wisdom points beyond itself:

one greater than Solomon is here (Matthew 12:42), the One in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden (Colossians 2:3), and through union with whom believers receive “wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30). The prayer posture this text calls for is ultimately the posture of faith in Christ — total dependence, other-orientation, and trust in divine generosity.

Main Takeaway

You will face tasks today that are genuinely too large for you — relationships that need more wisdom than you have, responsibilities that require more discernment than you can generate, decisions that matter more than your confidence warrants. The God who met Solomon at Gibeon with an open-handed offer is still in that posture toward you. Come the way Solomon came — honestly needy, genuinely concerned for others rather than for your own security — and ask for a hearing heart. He gives generously. He gives beyond what is asked. And He is not less generous with those who are in Christ than He was with the son of David.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Turning this into a prosperity-adjacent formula.** The structure of the passage — Solomon asked for something other-directed, and God added riches and honor — is routinely domesticated into a principle: “ask for the right thing and God will give you what you really want too.” This inverts the passage’s logic. The text is not teaching a prayer strategy that maximizes personal gain; it is revealing the character of a generous God who responds to a self-forgetful request with lavish grace. Preachers must resist the gravitational pull of the “secret to getting more from God” frame that this text, superficially read, seems to support.
- **Using Solomon primarily as a moral exemplar.** “Be like Solomon — ask for wisdom, not stuff” is technically consistent with the text’s surface reading but functionally moralistic. It places the weight on the listener’s performance of the right kind of humility rather than on the God who gives generously to those who ask. The Edmond Clowney anti-moralism principle applies directly here: the passage is not primarily teaching “how to ask well” but revealing “who God is when you ask this way.” The application must be grounded in God’s character before it can land as a genuine call to action.
- **Ignoring the shadow in vv. 1–3.** Skipping past the marriage alliance and the high-place worship in order to get to the inspiring dream account leaves the text’s honest complexity on the floor. The shadow matters: God comes to Solomon as a

genuinely mixed-motive, imperfectly obedient worshipper and gives him extraordinary gifts anyway. Removing the shadow removes the grace.

- **Treating v. 14 as undermining the gift.** Some readings make so much of the conditional “if you walk in my ways” that the entire dream account is read retrospectively as a warning: Solomon will eventually fail, so the wisdom was always conditional and fragile. While Solomon’s later failure is real and canonical, reading it back into chapter 3 collapses the text’s own logic. At this point in the narrative, the gift is genuine and the conditional is a covenant invitation, not a foreshadowed indictment. Preach the chapter as it stands before invoking what comes later.
- **Sentimentalizing the judicial account.** The famous sword scene is frequently preached as a touching story about mother-love, losing its primary function as a demonstration that God-given wisdom actually accomplishes what unaided human discernment cannot. The point is not that love is powerful; the point is that the wisdom God gave Solomon at Gibeon worked — in the hardest case, with the most vulnerable plaintiffs, producing justice. The community’s awe in v. 28 is directed not at Solomon but at the wisdom of God in Solomon. Exposition must ensure the same direction of awe in the congregation.
- **Failing to connect to Christ.** First Kings 3 stands in the stream of Solomonic wisdom tradition that runs directly into Matthew 12:42 (“something greater than Solomon is here”) and Colossians 2:3 (“in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”). A sermon on 1 Kings 3 that ends with Solomon has not finished the canonical argument. The hearing heart Solomon asked for, the wisdom God gave, and the justice it produced are all anticipations of the One who is Wisdom incarnate — and the prayer posture this text calls for is ultimately the posture of faith in Him.