

Your Reputation Precedes You

1 Kings 10:1-9 (NIV)

¹ When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relationship to the LORD, she came to test Solomon with hard questions. ² Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan—with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones—she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind. ³ Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her. ⁴ When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, ⁵ the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the LORD, she was overwhelmed. ⁶ She said to the king, “The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. ⁷ But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. ⁸ How happy your people must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! ⁹ Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD’s eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness.”

“Your reputation precedes you.” Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Honestly, you can only know by the context whether the reputation that precedes you is a good reputation, a reputation valuable for the situation, or if it’s a bad reputation, a reputation that is unreliable, that may cause conflicts, that they won’t resolve the situation in the desired manner.

King Solomon, David’s son who ruled after him, certainly had a reputation. “God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else... And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. From all nations people came to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.” (1 Kings 4:29-34)

This is what prompted the Queen of Sheba to come visit Solomon. “When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relationship to the LORD, she came to test Solomon with hard questions.” (verse 1) But she had her own reputation, and she wanted that to precede her in this visit. So, she brought a “very great caravan—with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones.” (verse 2) Solomon would see that she also had great wealth as she then tested him with hard questions. These hard questions may have just been the tough to answer questions regarding life, the universe, and everything. These also could have been types of riddles, “brain teasers,” things that would come from the mythical sphinx, meant to test the mental aptitude of the Israelite king. Would his reputation hold up? The Queen of Sheba would find out.

But things changed after she arrived and spent time with Solomon. She saw the splendor of his palace, how well his servants and officials were treated. She also saw how he worshiped the LORD at the temple. The reputation of Solomon that she had heard was not accurate – not even to half. He was so much wiser than she had heard, so much wealthier. “She was overwhelmed” (verse 5) – more literally, her breath was taken away. The riddles dropped, and instead “she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind.” (verse 2) And, in the end, she praised the LORD for all the wisdom and wealth that Solomon had. “Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD’s eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness.” (verse 9) She learned that Solomon in real life was so much greater than the reputation that preceded him.

What’s your reputation? I mean, I don’t have a reputation like Solomon. I don’t think any of us could claim that. I’m certainly not the wisest person in the world nor the wealthiest. Sometimes I say pretty dumb things. I am thankful to have enough wealth to get through today. I am no king with power to rule and administer justice. I’m a nobody. I try to be a good person. I try to be a good husband, a good wife, a good son, a good daughter, a good student, a good worker, a good boss, a good parent. My family loves me (most of the time). It’s a reputation that I’m content with.

Is that what people see? Is that all they see? Do you try to fly under the radar as much as possible, that you don’t actually have a reputation because no one outside of your family knows you? Do you consider yourself someone with a low or insignificant reputation?

But that's who you are, how you are defined. God defines you and gives you a reputation. You are the one that Jesus came for. God loved you so much that he gave his one and only Son for you. He loved you so much that he came as the Immanuel, the God made flesh, to live under God's law for you, to keep it for you, for every second of every day starting already as a baby. He came not just as the "king of the Jews" descended from Solomon's family line but the King of all kings. He came for you to take away your sins and clothe you with his perfection. He sent his Holy Spirit upon you through this message to bring you to faith, to bring you to the Light of the world, the Light no darkness can overcome. He brought you to himself to be saved from your imperfections and your debt of sin. God made perfect and worthy before him right now.

You are the fulfillment of prophecy, as Isaiah wrote some 700 years before Jesus came, "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." (Isaiah 60:3) This is your reputation – not just that of a husband, wife, son, daughter, student, worker, boss, or parent. You are loved by God, clothed in God's perfection, saved by God from your sin, from eternal death in hell with the devil. You are part of the nations that have come to God's Light, the ones who have come to believe in Jesus as true Man and true God, who lived perfectly for us to clothe us with perfection, and then died for us to pay our debt of sin.

How can we make this reputation precede us? Look for moments to build this reputation with the people God has put in your life. Can you be the hope when a situation looks hopeless – a moment where you can share your belief that God will provide even when we don't see how? When someone feels like a complete failure and is questioning why they exist, can we give that person the self-worth that comes from Christ, to show them how God sees them because of the life and death of Jesus Christ for them? When you are wronged, can you show people what it is to forgive as Christ has forgiven you?

Being this kind of person, building this kind of reputation, will cause people to seek you out. They may seek you out like the Queen of Sheba, that they come to test you with hard questions, riddles, things that you may not know the answer to. They will want you to explain how you know that the Bible is true and that no other religion is. They will want you to explain tough, bigger than us concepts, like the Trinity – a three in one God. They will want you to explain how Jesus is God who also took on human flesh in order to die. Some will do this to antagonize; others will ask honestly wanting an answer. We hate not knowing all the answers to those questions because we don't want to look ignorant. We don't want people to look down on us or on our faith or our God since we don't have all the answers. If we don't have the answers, we feel like we let them and ourselves down – as well as our God. It feels like everything hinges on having the right answers at the right time. So, we shy away from these tough questions so as to not get them wrong.

Instead of hiding from such questions, embrace them. Embrace the challenge. Write down the questions, and then seek the answer. Google the question to start getting ideas, finding the Bible references. Read the correlating parts of the Bible. Ask your pastor. By doing this, you will grow in your knowledge and your faith. And then you will also have an opportunity for a follow-up conversation to share your faith with them again. In this way, you will build a reputation of someone who takes their faith seriously, who seeks to understand the hard questions. You can build a reputation of someone who shares their faith instructively, with great patience and care, not as someone who is combative or dismissive.

Why work at making this kind of a reputation to precede you? We do this so that the praise and glory of such a reputation will go to God and bring people to him, just like it did with the Queen of Sheba. She came not just because of Solomon's wealth, but also because of his relationship to the LORD. She gave God the praise for all of Solomon's wealth and wisdom. In fact, this queen most likely came to faith through her interactions with Solomon because Jesus said of her: "The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here." (Matthew 12:42 / Luke 11:31) If she will rise to condemn unbelievers, that means she died believing that Solomon's descendant, Jesus Christ himself, was also her Savior – the one who lived to complete God's laws perfectly for her and who died to pay her debt of sin. She, like the wise men, like you and me, are the prophesied nations who have come to the light of God. That's our reputation from God, our reputation to make known to others.

To build a reputation like this that brings glory to God and brings people to God is not built in a day. It may very well take us our whole lives to do this. But as we continue to show Christ in our lives, seeking Jesus to answer the tough questions in life, God will continue to bring nations to his Light. He will continue to bring people to faith and clothe them with Christ's perfection. May God use our reputations in Christ that precede us to draw others to his Light, just like Solomon did. Amen.