
The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth—let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

(Proverbs 1:1-7)

Introduction

You may remember that, years ago, there was a bit of a trend among Christians regarding the WWJD phenomenon: What Would Jesus Do? What started out as a catchphrase soon morphed into a full blown marketing phenomenon. Bracelets, T-shirts, Bible covers, mugs, and a host of other trinkets were created bearing the letters WWJD.

It was a good question to ask. One answer, I think, is that Jesus would—did—practice the Proverbs. After all, if he grew in wisdom, he doubtless did so by learning from and obeying biblical wisdom. The book of Proverbs was given for us to learn how to live wisely. As we saw previously, it was written to instruct “the simple” (v. 4) as well as “the wise” (v. 5). Sadly, “fools” (v. 7) will not heed the wisdom contained in this book. The book invites one and all to come and learn wisdom—except the fool, who will not pay heed. And the reason that all are invited to come is because of what the book offers. And what it offers is essentially four things. (I am indebted to Tremper Longman for much of what follows.)

The Purpose of Proverbs

Having previously considered the people of Proverbs, we now turn our attention to the purpose of Proverbs.

Intelligence

First, Proverbs offers intelligence. This is what is behind the phrase “to know wisdom” in v. 2. The Hebrew word translated “to know” carries with it more than mere intellectual assent. It speaks of a deep, vibrant understanding of something. And what Proverbs offers us is the ability to know “wisdom.” This translates a very general term, which speaks of skill. All the other wisdom words flow from this one. Lane observes that “the concept of wisdom is about how best to find our way through the maze of this world.”

The first mention of this word in the Bible is in Exodus 28:3–4, where it speaks of the designers of the priestly garments being “filled with wisdom.” The same word is applied in Exodus 31:1–7 to Bezalel, who was one of the artisans working on the tabernacle. These men could look at the raw materials they were given and see beyond the obvious to what those raw materials could become. God had revealed what he wanted, and these men could see how to take what they were given and make it into what God commanded. This is wisdom: intelligently living life according to God’s revealed plan.

One of our daughters was born in the Sir James Simpson theatre at the Park Lane Clinic here in Johannesburg. Sir Simpson was an obstetrician, who first discovered the use of chloroform in anaesthesia. He is widely regarded as a significant father of modern medicine. He also came to faith in Christ in his later years. When he was once asked what his greatest discovery was, he replied, “The greatest discovery I have made is that I have a Saviour.” This is biblical wisdom, and can be contrasted with many other “great” fools who have failed to realise the same.

Instruction

Proverbs was also given to us for instruction: “to know ... instruction” and “to receive instruction in wise dealing” (vv. 2–3). “Instruction” speaks of discipline, and is actually the old covenant word for an education. As Bridges has noted, “Of all OT books [Proverbs] is the one that we may think of as most distinctively educational.” The word is even tied to the concept of corporal punishment, of which Proverbs has much to say. If we do not align ourselves with God’s revealed will, we will experience a whole lot of pain.

We should bear in mind that biblical education is primarily concerned with teaching covenant faithfulness. Therefore, says Lane, “Proverbs is education for the whole of life.” It is one of God’s classrooms in which we learn to live so as to avoid chastening. It is an exhortation for God’s covenant people to obey God’s covenant. It instructs, encourages and illustrates covenant-keeping.

The one who heeds Proverbs, and is therefore wise, will “obtain guidance.” This phrase literally speaks of management with ropes, a reference to the ancient method of guiding ships in harbours. Proverbs is designed to guide the ship of our life in a way that honours God. If we do not allow our lives to be guided, we may well end up shipwrecked.

The wisdom of Proverbs helps us to know where we are, the dangers that exist, and the blessings that are possible. This book provides intensely practical wisdom. I can recall a time when I printed out, and placed next to my bedside, Proverbs 6:6: “Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise.” When I was tempted to hit the snooze button and roll back over to sleep, I would see that verse and be reminded of biblical wisdom.

Insight

A third thing that Proverbs offers us is insight: “to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing” (vv. 2–3). “Insight” means to mentally distinguish and separate, to discern. David surrounded himself with men who had understanding of the times, so they knew what Israel ought to do (1 Chronicles 12:32). This is the burden of Proverbs.

Those who have insight have the ability to recognise the true nature of a situation of circumstance. It gives us the ability to look beyond the obvious. It gives us insight regarding certain temptations, and the outcome of particular pursuits. It helps us to choose the right friends, to work hard, and to wisely spend our money. It speaks so many practical ways about discernment.

Proverbs helps us to develop our investigative powers. Solomon speaks of “prudence” in v. 4, which speaks of the ability to use reason, to navigate the problems of life. Derek Kidner describes Proverbs as “sanctified street smarts.”

Solomon speaks further of “discretion” (v. 4), which means to think, plan, purpose or devise. Positively, it speaks of the ability to walk the path of life in a constructive way, thereby avoiding destruction.

Integrity

All of the above will result in biblical integrity, which is the promise of Proverbs: “righteousness, justice, and equity” (v. 3). These words point to the ethical nature of wisdom. They speak to something that is measurable according to a right standard—the standard being God and his word.

Proverbs is an intensely relational book. It shows us “righteousness,” which speaks of a right relationship with God—having right principles. It shows us “justice,” which points to our relationships with people—being the right kind of person and treating others righteously. It points us to “equity,” which defines our relationship with the world—following the right paths. There is no better book for counselling than Proverbs, for it shows us how to behave toward God, others, and the world around us.

Perhaps Proverbs ebbs and flows with the history of integrity because the church ebbs and flows with its stand on ethical issues. When the church falls on ethically hard times, Proverbs falls on quiet times. But when the church is serious about integrity—a major theme of Proverbs—the book is loved and studied and obeyed. Proverbs reminds us that God does have ethical expectation of his people, and that wisdom takes him and his words seriously. It points us to covenant-keeping and helps us to avoid covenant-breaking. Christian integrity is, after all, nothing more than keeping covenant with God.

The Principle of Proverbs

But having considered the people of Proverbs, and the purpose of Proverbs, we also want to consider the principle of Proverbs, which is found in v. 7: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” The foundational principle for gleaning from Proverbs is not a moralistic approach to its wisdom, but a submission to its wisdom in the fear of the Lord. We must approach Proverbs on our knees before God.

The concept of the fear of God is found no fewer than seventeen times in Proverbs. It is this fear that drives us to live a life of wisdom. The fear of the Lord is to hate evil (8:13). It is the beginning of wisdom (9:10). It is a fountain of life (14:27). It is the instruction of wisdom (15:33). Reverence is the key to relationship with others and with the world, all because it is the key to our relationship with God.

But what is the fear of the Lord? What does it look like to fear God? Andy Davis gives us a good illustration in *An Infinite Journey*. He writes,

When God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel, everything he did to set the stage was designed to bring terror to the hearts of his people: the days of consecration, the command not to venture on the mountain lest they die, the earthquake, the dark cloud, the smoke and fire billowing from Mount Sinai like a furnace, the loud voice. Then God said an astonishing thing to his trembling people through Moses: “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning” (Exodus 20:20). Everything God had been doing for three days had been to make certain the people of God feared him. All of it was calculated, planned, and accomplished to bring about fear. But once that fear was established, God commanded “Do not fear!” In effect, God’s message to his beloved people in Exodus 20:20 is this: fear me properly, and you need fear nothing else for the rest of your life. The converse is true as well: if you don’t fear me, you have reason to fear everything else in life.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, and the design of Proverbs is that we will know wisdom. The fear of the Lord is the foundation for a life of obedience. Those who shape their lives in accordance with obedience to what the Lord has revealed in his word are deemed to be wise. Solomon, author of the bulk of the Proverbs, was the wisest son of Adam who ever lived. For many years, he feared, and therefore obeyed, the Lord. Sadly, he was not always wise, because he did not always fear the Lord. I pray that we will not make the same mistake.

As we draw this study to a close, we do well to ask: Why is the fear of the Lord the beginning of wisdom? It is wisdom’s *beginning* because it drives us to Christ. The fool (v. 7) treats God flippantly, but does not live a life that is wise. But the proper fear of God drives us to Jesus Christ, who cautioned, “And do not fear those who kill the body but

cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28).

The fool pays no heed to God’s wrath. Therefore the wisdom of Proverbs is irrelevant to him. But the wise are those who, by God’s grace, appreciate the fear of the wrath of God. This drives us to awareness of our need for a Saviour. And by God’s grace, his Spirit drives us to Jesus Christ—the one who is the sum of all wisdom.

David Atkinson observes, “Jesus Christ, as God’s gift, became for us the means by which we know God’s wisdom, righteousness and spiritual life.” Gary Brady adds, “Truly to be wise, we must get to grips with Christ.”

Do you want to learn Proverbs? Do you want what it promises? Then meet the prerequisite: Submit to God by confessing and repenting of your sin as you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour. Do the wise thing, and then live wisely.

AMEN