



BIBLE READING PROJECT

SOLOMON'S BETTER: MEETING JESUS IN PROVERBS

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As we wrap up our readings in the book of Proverbs and get ready for Ecclesiastes, it is worthwhile to think about the implications of all of this wisdom teaching that we are encountering in the Old Testament.

First, we will approach the book of Proverbs in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Then, next week we will explore the model of wisdom found in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Proverbs and Faith

What now? You have covered all of the basics. You are starting to understand your relationship to God. You have put your trust in the Jesus as your Lord and Savior. You pursue the Scriptures passionately to see how your life can be more conformed to the teaching of the Word of God. You see sanctification happening in your life. Your mind and heart are full of all of these grand images of a Creator God, and a people of God, and salvation, and the Devil, and the final battle, and judgment, and the new heavens and the new earth. But all of this great teaching doesn't change the fact that you have to get up in the morning and go to work or school or wake up the kids and confront the series of joys and struggles that come with every day of human life. What are you supposed to do with all of this time that you are forced to be with other people and do things that seem to have nothing to do with the good news of Jesus Christ?

Part of the good news is that we serve a God who wants to have a hand in, indeed he wants to rule over, every aspect of our lives. Our faith is not a faith that becomes obsolete at the church door. Instead, it is a faith that spills out into our daily lives, a faith that has something to say about our personal relationships, our business transactions, our opinions and the way that we articulate them, and just about every aspect of our earthly lives.

Faith finds expression through wise living.

When we think about living wisely, we may get an image in our heads of an aged, robed monk with a distant stare and the palms of his hands pressed together. This image is really a caricature of wisdom. Truly wise living is all around us and opportunities to be wise show up in the things that we do every day.

This is what the book of Proverbs is about. It is about living life according to the skills that God has given us. Skillful living: that is the essence of the wise life.

The Wise Sage

Proverbs freely offers the way to wisdom to anyone who will take it. The sages who taught wisdom taught it from experience. They had gained wisdom and encouraged their pupils to put aside foolishness and get wisdom for themselves. Their task was not easy, and it was made more difficult by the fact that every pupil starts off as young and an inexperienced learner, much like the gullible or simple person that the book of Proverbs talks about so much (see Prov 7:7; 22:3; 14:15). The transition from simplemindedness to wisdom is a long and arduous process.

King Solomon is often depicted as the wisest sage in all of the Old Testament. As a young man, Solomon unexpectedly asked God for divinely given wisdom, and, perhaps more unexpected, God gave it to him freely (1 Kings 3:5-14). Solomon's wisdom served him well and caused his reputation to be known in distant lands.

After King Solomon had fortified his kingdom and built it up, the Queen of Sheba visited his palace. When she saw Solomon at work she praised him, saying,

The report was true that I heard in my own land of your words and of your wisdom, but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes had seen it. And behold, the half was not told me. Your wisdom and prosperity surpass the report that I heard. Happy are your men! Happy are your servants, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! (1 Kings 10:6-8)

Solomon's achievements through wisdom were so great that they even surpassed the rumors that were being told about them.

Solomon's wisdom was also on display in several of the collections of proverbs found in the book of Proverbs. In the Old Testament, he became the model of a wise man. But even his great wisdom was not enough to keep him from falling into foolishness and disobedience. The Golden Age of Israel that he established in his youth was squandered later in his life, and the kingdom was divided after his death.

So we have to ask, "Is there any one who is truly, perfectly wise?" If the greatest sage of the Old Testament is Solomon, then what does this say about the rest of us who cannot hope to be as wise as he was. Is a truly wise life even possible?

To find the answer we have to look past the Old Testament to a character of the New Testament. Most Christians know that Jesus Christ is the Messiah in the line of David, the King of the kingdom of God. We know that he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. We recognize him as our Lord and as our Savior. We often neglect, however, the fact that he is also the only sage who ever lived the perfectly wise life. He is our model for wisdom, better than the model of Solomon, because he maintained the wise life to the end, to his death and beyond in his resurrection.

Jesus the Great Sage

So what does the book of Proverbs tell us about Jesus?

First, like wisdom, Jesus was present at the creation of the heavens and the earth, but whereas wisdom was a spectator to the act, Jesus was involved in the creative work. We read how the figurative Lady Wisdom rejoiced to see God's creation of the earth and mankind (Prov 8:30-31), but the Evangelist John tells us that it was through Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, that the earth was made (John 1:1-3). This means that from the start, Jesus knew wisdom in a way that no other sage, not even King Solomon, ever could. In fact, he created wisdom and wove it into the fabric of the world. So it should not surprise us that the person of Jesus would embody the wise life in a way that no other human possibly could.

The Apostle Paul makes the connection between Christ and wisdom in his letter to the Colossians. Here he is stating his goal for ministry. This is what Paul wants the church at Colossae and in the surrounding areas to know:

My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Col 2:2-3)

In stating his ministry goal, Paul uses words that were commonly used in Proverbs, “understanding”, “wisdom”, and “knowledge”, but he says that he is pursuing “complete understanding” and “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,” and that complete wisdom is only accessible through Jesus Christ. In other words, before humanity was introduced to the person and work of Jesus Christ, it had only a partial understanding of these aspects of wisdom. This is not to say that the wisdom of the Old Testament is not worth learning anymore. On the contrary, it is indispensable to living the wise life, and it is the solid foundation upon which the sages built their teachings. Surely Old Testament wisdom offers helpful, even powerful, skills for living, but it isn't complete. It is part of the story, or it is a story without an ending. Jesus is the ending that wraps up all the loose ends.

Or think about it this way. Say I want to introduce you to my friend, Ryan. I can tell you about Ryan, give you his height, weight, hair and eye color. I can describe his personality for you, his likes and dislikes, everything that you need to know to recognize him. Even if I describe him as well as I could, you won't be able to say that you truly know him until you meet him face to face, and talk with him, and become his friend too. Only then can you say that you truly know him.

The same goes for wisdom. We can, and should, study the proverbs with the aim of gaining understanding, wisdom and knowledge, but we won't gain “complete understanding” until we acquire faith in Jesus Christ.

It works the other way too. If we have faith in Jesus, we are not “off the hook” when it comes to learning the wisdom of the Old Testament. There is a lot of important teaching and advice found in the Proverbs that we cannot find in the gospels or the rest of the New Testament. Best of all, the wisdom found in books like Proverbs help us better understand Jesus as our great sage and teacher, because it is ultimately a description of him. As a result, we should still read Proverbs, but we should read it with an eye on the one true and perfect sage, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Wisdom and the Holy Spirit

It is not a matter of only “thinking” about Jesus when we read the Proverbs (or the rest of the Bible for that matter). Paul says that we should not settle for simply learning about Jesus, but that we should seek to get the mind of Jesus himself, and the only way to get the mind of Jesus is through the Holy Spirit. Listen to what Paul says to the church in Corinth:

This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot

understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: 'For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?'

But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor 2:13-16)

The human wisdom that Paul is talking about here is what we may call, “worldly wisdom,” wisdom established not on the Scriptures but on human thinking. Paul is saying that there is a better wisdom, the spiritual wisdom of Christ. It is through the Holy Spirit that we gain insight into the mind of our Lord and Savior. As a matter of fact it is only through the Holy Spirit that such spiritual wisdom can be known (as Paul said earlier, **“no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.”** [1 Cor 2:11b]). It was the Holy Spirit that empowered Paul to write letters that would become Scriptures (“the spiritual truths and spiritual words” that he is talking about in v. 13), and it is the Holy Spirit that empowers us to understand what we are reading when we open our Bibles.

We should remember the importance of the Spirit when reading Proverbs, and pray to the Spirit that he would empower our reading so that we would not merely read words but acquire the mind of Christ that Paul tells us about. That is how we can acquire the complete wisdom of which the sages only dreamed.