



THE TREASURY
OF GOD'S
WISDOM

Meditations from the Faculty of
WESTMINSTER SEMINARY CALIFORNIA



JOHNSON | BAUGH | FESKO | HORTON | VAN EE | KIM
CLARK | TELFER | ESTELLE | KEELE | GODFREY

THE TREASURY OF
GOD'S WISDOM

*And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*

Isaiah 11:2

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1725 Bear Valley Parkway, Escondido, California 92027,
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ISBN: 978-0-9828805-2-4

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Cover design and interior design by Megan York.

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PREFACE

DENNIS E. JOHNSON

*Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?¹*

T. S. Eliot’s haunting questions in “Choruses from the Rock” were published in 1934, many decades before the dawn of our digital age, with its 24/7 connectivity via omnipresent devices that demand ceaseless attention. Eliot’s alarm over wisdom lost in knowledge and knowledge lost in information rings disturbingly true today amid the frenzied chatter of blogs and the feverish chirps of social media. Without denying the value of the latest information technology, we must admit that today we are even more awash in data and thirstier for wisdom than was the world that Eliot lamented.

Information is at our fingertips instantly. Wisdom, on the other hand, grows slowly over time, aging and maturing through quiet disciplines such as listening, observing, pondering, and suffering. Data informs quick decisions. Wisdom, by contrast, perceives beneath the surface and gazes beyond the present, setting the trajectory for a long-term, lifelong pilgrimage toward a destination of unfathomable joy. Wisdom is God’s gift humbly received, not human brilliance triumphantly achieved and acclaimed.

The faculty of Westminster Seminary California is striving to fulfill God’s call to prepare servants for Christ’s church—pastors and others—whose lives exhibit the gracious transformation of “the Spirit of the LORD, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD” (Isa. 11:2). Each Thursday throughout the 2016-17 academic year, the faculty’s morning devotions series led our seminary community in explorations of the Old Testament wisdom literature. We traced the wisdom motif throughout the Scriptures to its fullest expression

¹ T. S. Eliot, *The Rock: A Pageant Play* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1934).

in our Lord Jesus Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). Listeners found these meditations so edifying—simultaneously humbling and heartening—that we wanted to share some of them with a wider audience in this published form.

If you would like to listen to these meditations as we actually experienced them together or if they whet your appetite to hear how the series unfolded into the spring 2017 semester, the audio files are available at www.wscal.edu. Click on the “Resources” menu, then on the “Morning Devotions” tab. Please feel free to join us, listening to and learning from the Word of Christ, “who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

Our prayer is that the Lord will make you and us together wise through his Word, for the glory of his grace in the growth of his church through the gospel of his Son.



CHAPTER 1

THE SKILL OF GODLY LIVING

S. M. BAUGH

Professor of New Testament

Almighty God our Father, we thank you for calling us into your presence. We thank you for inviting us, who were forlorn and lost and hopeless, into the very courts of our great God and King. We thank you, O Lord, for your mercies and grace in this temporal place, not this building, O Lord, of course, but the temple that you have established on earth, your church, and indeed people redeemed from the far flung edges of the earth where we are to enter into your very presence in Christ Jesus. We thank you, O Lord, that through the ages your truth has firmly stood. It will last forever and is our hope and our wisdom through Jesus Christ, who is our righteousness and our redemption and wisdom. We pray this and thank you in Christ's name, Amen.

This meditation is the first in a series that the faculty will be offering on the theme of Wisdom in the Old Testament. I asked to go first in this series because I have some thoughts to offer about biblical wisdom in general that will set a context for the messages of my fellow professors. I hope you find it edifying.

I'd like you to think about wisdom from a specific starting point. I would describe the concept of biblical wisdom as the *skill of godly living*. Consider those three words: *skill*, *godly*, and *living*. Those are my three divisions of my chapel message to you: the skill of godly living.

Now I'm not saying "the skill of godly living" is how you should define the Hebrew or Greek terms for wisdom in the Bible. This is not really a definition of wisdom per se. It's more of a description of the gist of wisdom, a starting point for thinking about wisdom in the Scriptures. I find it to be very helpful, personally, to work from this starting point. So I'd like to talk about these three themes, the *skill of godly living*, as they are found primarily in Proverbs, and a little bit in Psalms. We might even sneak a peek at the New Testament if we can

get away with it!

Now since we are approaching wisdom, the skill of godly living, in the Old Testament, we want to adopt a Hebrew frame of mind. So we will proceed chiasmically, since our Hebrew authors liked chiasms. As a result, we are going to start in the middle of our description of wisdom and talk about “godly” first, since that’s the easiest.

GODLINESS

So wisdom and godliness go together. This is really pretty obvious. You don’t need me to elaborate on that at great length. Proverbs opens up, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov. 1:7). One of the things you find in the opening of Proverbs is that knowledge, wisdom, and instruction—which the Greeks would call *paideia* (discipline)—together describe *what you need to guide you in life*. That’s the equivalent of what this means here. Those three things really go together. So the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but the kind of knowledge we are talking about is the kind that is really wisdom and instruction in how to live life. That’s what the fear of the Lord is the beginning of. So you cannot have true wisdom or knowledge in the sense of how to live life before the Lord successfully in this creation without the fear of the Lord. It’s really the foundation of all. And this is even more explicit in Proverbs 9:10, which says, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Knowledge of the Most Holy, that is understanding” (SMB). That was my own translation (*kind of a risky thing to do—it wasn’t even in the Septuagint!*). But the word for “holy” here is plural and I take that, in my naiveté, as this holiness of God supreme. So knowledge of the Holy One is central to biblical wisdom. And this is a way to magnify God’s holiness. So you can render that as I did, “the knowledge of the Most Holy, that is understanding.” If you want wisdom, you start with the knowledge of God. God is the starting point for all of our wisdom. And this is not just accumulating facts about him, but walking before him, as we will see.

So wisdom goes hand in glove with godliness, with the fear the Lord. And the fear of the Lord includes trusting in him, as well as being careful with how we walk before him in fear, in holy fear and reverence toward him. Because he is someone to be revered and respected supremely.

The opposite of this is folly, obviously. And you can see the fear of the Lord particularly acutely, when you see the opposite. The opposite of the fear of the Lord is scoffing, which comes out very often, not only in Proverbs and Psalms,

but also in Isaiah. For example, Isaiah 29 says, “For the ruthless will come to nothing and the scoffer cease. And all who watch to do evil shall be cut off” (29:20). These are three perspectives on people heading toward utter ruin: the ruthless, the scoffers, and those who watch to do evil. Vivid imagery, isn’t it? It’s someone who is on guard to do evil. Someone who stays up at night looking for a way to get away with evil. Someone who invests time and energy in it. Now, I’ve heard that most drug dealers could make more money if they worked an honest job. (They would probably live longer too!) I don’t know how accurate that claim is, but it would be very interesting if it were true.

But when you think about someone who’s watching to do evil and ruthless, Isaiah says that’s the scoffer as well. And when you think about the scoffer, particularly in Proverbs, we’re not talking about the Gentiles who come in to Israel and scoff at their religion. We are talking about Israelites who are scoffing. These are people in the old covenant church who are scoffing, turning their backs on the Lord and scoffing. These are apostates. These are people who belong to the covenant people who are scoffing. You should keep that in mind when you’re reading Proverbs. It’s not talking about the outsiders usually. It’s talking about people within Israel. If you want to see this further in Isaiah, you look at Isaiah 28, a very poignant passage, where God addresses the scoffers who have made a covenant with death saying, “We will serve you. Protect us from you.” But the Lord says, “They will go down into their grave. These scoffers who have made the covenant with death, I will annul that covenant and they will die” (Isa. 28:18—22).

So God has some very strong words about scoffers who think that somehow they can avoid the wrath of God. Proverbs 14:9 says, “Fools mock at the guilt offering but the upright enjoy acceptance.” This is how you know that we are talking about an Israelite. “Fools mock at the guilt offering.” They have before them the law of God with avenues for forgiveness from God. This guilt offering is an avenue, a sacrament put in place under the old covenant to bring them to faith and to show them the provision of God for the forgiveness of sins. And they mock at it.

“The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.” (*Does this sound familiar from Romans?*) “Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat

up my people as they eat bread and do not call upon the Lord?”

Actually, this is Psalm 14:1—4, quoted by Paul in Romans 3.

Proverbs 10:23 says, “Doing wrong is like a joke to a fool, but wisdom is pleasure to a man of understanding.” Here you can see why you have to have godliness. It’s foolish to treat doing wrong like some joke. It’s utter folly. Turn and take up the avenue of wisdom.

You can see this further in one’s attitude toward the law. Look at Psalm 19 and meditate upon that. “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple” (Ps. 19:7). “Simple” here means naïve. When you’re reading Proverbs and you hear about the simple, you tend to think of a child. They are kind of naïve, right? They just don’t know how things work, so you can pull practical jokes on them. And we smile at that. But if you have a 40-year-old who should know better and is naïve, and blows all of his family’s money and ruins his life and the lives of others because he is stupid, naïve, simple, and has not learned these basic truths—then we don’t find *that* quaint and cute. That’s what we’re talking about here. We are talking about people who think that doing bad is a joke, who scoff and see themselves as clever, though in fact they are just naïve. They are heedless of life around them and of the ways of the Lord. They are heedless of it. They just say, “I don’t care about his law.”

You know, to us the law of God is perfect and sweet, sweeter than honey. For the redeemed of the Lord the condemnation of the law has been removed, so that now it is our way of wisdom to obey the Lord, to walk in his ways. It’s like a spotlight showing us how we can walk wisely before him. The law should be your delight not a fearful thing, because it has no more condemnation for us. It is to us the Lord’s own way. It’s rooted in his nature, and we should make it ours. “Because for those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, . . . there is a wisdom and a righteousness and a redemption that is found in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor. 1:24, 30 SMB). (*Notice how I managed to sneak in that New Testament passage!*)

LIVING

I have left the harder two words for the end. Biblical wisdom is “the skill of godly *living*.” If you don’t understand that wisdom is about living, then you need to read Proverbs more. One of the ways this comes out figuratively is that in Proverbs 1 through 9 you have what I regard as a kind of catechism of the old covenant. It’s interesting where wisdom is. Wisdom is in public. She’s on

the streets. She's in the courtyards. She's at the gates where all the public judicial transactions take place. And she's in the marketplaces. So wisdom is all about public life. When you read further in Proverbs, you'll find that wisdom deals with one's family relations, friends and strangers. So really any kind of personal relation you have is covered in wisdom instruction in the Scripture, because it's practical. It's about life. It's about bringing the law of God into reality in your life. The truths of God and your trust in him are worked out in this practical way throughout life. So this is a very important section for us to meditate on and I'm sure the faculty will be discussing this as we go further in this series on wisdom in the Old Testament.

SKILL

I'd like to finish up with our last theme, *skill*. The *skill* of godly living. Now we've all read in James that wisdom comes down from above (James 3:15; see 1:12). And it sounds to us like when you get up in the morning. The dew is just falling from the sky, so that if you walk outside you're going to get wet. So you might imagine that wisdom will just come down on you while you wander around, and there it is. God will give it to you. But read the first few verses of James (1:2-5). *Trial* produces endurance. *Testing*. He got that from Proverbs. "The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and the Lord tests hearts" (Prov. 17:3). That's Proverbs. Trials. You have to go through trial to develop your wisdom. The Lord will put you through things in this life to bring out your wisdom, and then you pray to him. You look to him. That's why the foundation of wisdom is the fear the Lord. You look to him for wisdom. And he develops it in you in the course of your life. He's holding your hand as you walk through life. But it's a skill that you develop.

Let me show you two ways in which this comes out in Proverbs. One is that Lady Wisdom says, "I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me" (Prov. 8:17). You have to seek wisdom. This is what it means to develop a skill. You seek wisdom. You search for her. This is not some arcane, obscure teaching. You don't have to go be an archaeologist to uncover some new document someplace where all wisdom is given to you. We have it right here, in Scripture. No, it means develop it by working on it, looking to the Lord as well as meditating on his Scripture and how its teachings relate to your circumstance. You develop this wisdom.

People don't just get older and automatically become wise. There are a lot of old fools wandering around in our world, aren't there? We may tend to think

you just get wise as you get older. And sometimes people do fall into a kind of wisdom just by getting tired of being beaten up again and again. “I won’t go down that alley anymore, OK? Ten times is enough for me; I finally get it.” And they are wiser. OK, fine. But that doesn’t mean they’ve learned wisdom thoughtfully, skillfully meditating on the Lord’s teaching and how it applies to them, and then doing it and developing it in their life, developing habits of the heart and hand. This is what it means to search for Lady Wisdom. “Those who seek me diligently will find me.” You have to be diligent to work God’s wisdom into your life.

Finally, the theme of wisdom as a *skill* comes out in Proverbs with its teaching about reproof. It’s one of the things you find here, and you find it elsewhere in the Bible, of course. But it’s interesting how often wisdom is equated or associated with reproof. Now, receiving reproof is not fun. This is why it’s a skill that you develop.

The ear that *listens to life-giving reproof*
will dwell among the wise.

Whoever ignores instruction despises himself,
but he who *listens to reproof* gains intelligence.

The fear of the Lord is instruction and wisdom,
and *humility comes before honor*. (Prov. 15:31—33)

“Humility comes before honor” because the humble person listens to reproof. “Reprove a wise man and he will love you” (Prov. 9:8). That’s not easy. No one wants to be reproved. We all want to be right. And we want public acceptance. We want the approval of our friends and family. We don’t want somebody to bring us up short and say, “That was wrong. You need to fix that.”

In the church today, if you practice church discipline, half the time people are just going to leave your church and go somewhere else. People don’t love reproof. They don’t love to have it pointed out that they have to change their behavior, that it is not wise or healthy for them to continue in sinful patterns. But if you develop the skill of godly living, you will love reproof. Now, I’m not saying you’re going to like it. That’s different. Liking it and loving it are two different things. You love it because you know it’s good for you, and you know they’re right.

I’ve got to change. It’s the one thing I learned when I got married. I was not perfect. Kathy reminded me of that, over and over. And when you’re married, there’s no escape, as it were. Divorce was never an option for us. It’s been 36

years and, boy, you know, I had to change because she was right. She was right. I didn't like it. I did not like it. But I'm a little wiser because of my dear wife, because she did not shy away from reproving and correcting me.

The skill of godly living, it impacts you in the most intimate relations you have: husband and wife, your friends, your family, your church. But the skill of godly living, this is where you'll find treasure for your soul. This is where you'll find peace and confidence. This is where you will find the way of Jesus.

O Lord, we do pray that you would help us to become wiser. Help us to listen to the message of your Scripture as it impacts us, particularly when we're wrong. Help us to love reproof, O Lord, not because we are wise in ourselves but because we love who you are and all of the wondrous things you've done for us in Christ Jesus. Be with us now and help us to continue our work today to become wiser and better instructed. In Jesus' name, Amen.



CHAPTER 2

OUR DIVINE VOCATION: WISDOM & SUFFERING

J. V. FESKO | JOB 4

Academic Dean & Professor of Systematic Theology & Historical Theology

Father, we are grateful that you are kind and merciful to us. We pray that you would shed the light of your revelation of Christ upon our hearts and illumine us by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we might read and hear your Word and profit to our sanctification, ultimately for the glorification of the triune God. We ask these things in Christ's name. Amen.

As we continue the faculty's series on wisdom literature, we turn this morning to Job, chapter 4. From this Scripture we will, I hope, gain insight into the connections between wisdom and suffering.

*Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said:
"If one ventures a word with you, will you be impatient?"*

Yet who can keep from speaking?

*Behold, you have instructed many,
and you have strengthened the weak hands.*

*Your words have upheld him who was stumbling,
and you have made firm the feeble knees.*

*But now it has come to you, and you are impatient;
it touches you, and you are dismayed.*

*Is not your fear of God your confidence,
and the integrity of your ways your hope?*

*Remember: who that was innocent ever perished?
Or where were the upright cut off?*

*As I have seen, those who plow iniquity
and sow trouble reap the same.*

By the breath of God they perish,

*and by the blast of his anger they are consumed.
The roar of the lion, the voice of the fierce lion,
the teeth of the young lions are broken.
The strong lion perishes for lack of prey,
and the cubs of the lioness are scattered.
Now a word was brought to me stealthily;
my ear received the whisper of it.
Amid thoughts from visions of the night,
when deep sleep falls on men,
dread came upon me, and trembling,
which made all my bones shake.
A spirit glided past my face;
the hair of my flesh stood up.
It stood still,
but I could not discern its appearance.
A form was before my eyes;
there was silence, then I heard a voice:
'Can mortal man be in the right before God?
Can a man be pure before his Maker?
Even in his servants he puts no trust,
and his angels he charges with error;
how much more those who dwell in houses of clay,
whose foundation is in the dust,
who are crushed like the moth.
Between morning and evening they are beaten to pieces;
they perish forever without anyone regarding it.
Is not their tent-cord plucked up within them,
do they not die, and that without wisdom?'"*

Beloved in Christ, it is clear that the book of Job presents one of the most complex labyrinths in the pages of Scripture. In our day and age we regularly feast upon “tweets,” very small amounts of information, but in Job we find very long monologues. And not only that, but we face the challenge of evaluating the counsel that Job receives from his friends. We typically criticize Job’s friends because of the erroneous way they handle Job’s suffering. But not everything that Job’s friends say is wrong or automatically incorrect. They say many true things. And so it requires a lot of careful attention to the text and to what the rest of the Scriptures teaches in order to discern where, specifically, Job’s friends

go astray.

Moreover, the premise of the whole book also, I think, presents a number of challenges to us. The premise of the book seems to be: “How can God make a wager with the devil when it seems as though Job is the one who pays the price?” And even though Job has his life restored, one must wonder at what cost? Job’s scars were undoubtedly deep, and never ultimately completely healed, at least in this life.

Nevertheless, as challenging as such things are, I don’t think we should pull back from the book of Job. Though there may be some challenges before us, we should definitely look into this book as intently as we can. Ultimately this daunting complexity marks all of God’s wisdom literature, wherever we find it throughout the Scriptures.

I think so often in life we want the clarity and simplicity of what we perceive as the teaching of the Law: “If you do A, then B will follow.” This is very simple, very easy to understand. Yet, if you look intently at the Law, even the Law has its complexities. It only has the appearance of simplicity. When you look, for example, at Solomon as he sought to apply the Law to the case where the two women were claiming to be the mother of the one surviving child, you find complexity in the face of the Law (1 Kings 3:16-28). Or when you look at the many case laws scattered throughout the Scriptures, but particularly in the Old Testament and the covenant code, there once again you find complexities.

But in the end we should embrace wisdom literature, and not fear it, because ultimately this is where we find Christ, as we do in the rest of the Scriptures—Christ, in whom are hidden all of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. To study wisdom literature, beloved in Christ, is ultimately to look into the face of Christ. And so what I want us to do this morning, be it ever so briefly, is to look at the book of Job, particularly at the fourth chapter and consider one of the responses of Job’s friends. First, I want us to look briefly at Job’s context. Second, consider the specifics of what Job’s friend has to say. And then third, we will draw the connections that we find here to Christ as he is revealed elsewhere in the Scriptures.

In terms of Job’s context, we are most likely familiar with its opening scene. God commends Job to Satan because of Job’s righteousness. Nevertheless, God ultimately allows Satan to sift Job, provided that he doesn’t take his life. And then we find that, on the heels of Job’s intense suffering, his friends arrive to console him. Now my family and I are using the book of Job for our devotions in the morning; and as I was re-reading this material earlier, it struck me that,

in one sense, we may give Job's friends the short end of the stick. We associate them with really bad pastoral counseling. Now, I don't want to undermine the fact that, yes, they do give some really bad pastoral advice.

But you have to notice here that they arrived at Job's destroyed home, and they sat silently with him for a week. I think that certainly conveys the depth of their concerns for him. They weren't simply Pharisees passing by saying, "Look at this guy." They sat with him, silently, for a week. And so they also wept with him because of his intense suffering. When they came upon him, they could not recognize him. If you have ever been into a hospital where you see somebody after a car accident, you know what Job's friends experienced.

I remember making a pastoral visit to a couple that had been in a serious car accident, and it was difficult to identify the person because they were so battered, bruised, and broken. That's the condition that they saw in Job, and so they wept with him and they were silent. So I don't think we should automatically cast Job's friends as hostile or ignorant, or somehow pharisaical. I think they were genuinely concerned for his well-being and for the state of his soul. We should keep this in mind as we look at the opening statements of one of Job's friends, Eliphaz the Temanite.

This brings us to our second point. Notice in chapter 4, verses 6 and following, Eliphaz's words:

Is not your fear of God your confidence, and the integrity of your ways your hope? Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed. The roar of the lion, the voice of the fierce lion, the teeth of the young lions are broken. The strong lion perishes for lack of prey, and the cubs of the lioness are scattered. (Job 4:6-10)

Eliphaz the Temanite's bottom line is this: "Job, you sinned. God is punishing you." This is clear. Our immediate reaction to such an idea is that this is absolutely wrong-headed. We have had the privilege of being able to stand, if you will, in the divine court where God, in chapters 1 and 2, says, "No, Job is a blameless and upright man and fears me and turns away from evil." So we know categorically that Eliphaz is wrong.

But at the same time, we shouldn't dispense with Eliphaz's observation all too quickly. We can't immediately write off what he says. His basic point in chapters 4 and 5 is that God uses suffering to bring sinners to repentance.

In chapter 5 verse 17, the second half of Eliphaz's initial monologue, he says, "Behold, blessed is the one whom God reprove; therefore despise not the discipline of the Almighty." This is good theology! This is true! He echoes the book of Proverbs. Proverbs 3:11-12 says, "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reprove him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights." I think Eliphaz sees his friend suffering and he says, "I want you to know you are not as innocent as you think. The Lord is disciplining you. Submit!" I think it's the heart-felt cry of a friend who is genuinely concerned with the well-being of his friend. This is a sentiment that we find echoed in the New Testament, for example in Hebrews 12:5-6, "And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

So I don't think Eliphaz is saying, "Repent, you sinful slug!" I think he's saying, "Job, son of God, your Father is disciplining you. Submit to your Father's discipline. He loves you." I think it's a grave concern. I think we can too quickly dismiss Eliphaz's theology. But given our knowledge of the big picture, I think we can definitely say that it's been erroneously applied. This is good doctrine, but the wrong context in which to use it. So what was Eliphaz missing? Why did he misapply good doctrine? Aside from the fact that he wasn't privy to the heavenly court conversation between God and Satan, what was the problem with Eliphaz's well-intentioned counsel?

This brings me to my third and final point, which is: if we approach the Law apart from Christ, we only end up with the covenant of works. We only have, "If A, then B. If you are obedient, then you will be rewarded; if you disobey, then you will be punished." If you approach the Law apart from Christ, that is all that you have. There is no other classification for Job's situation. All suffering must be categorically the result of willful sin. What do you do with Job, the righteous man who nevertheless suffers? Quite simply, if you have no place for Job, then you have no place for Christ – the truly righteous Man who nevertheless suffered. Christ and his cross reveal the wisdom of God. And that is what we see revealed here, albeit in shadow form. We don't see it with the same type of clarity with which it emerges in the New Testament, yet we see it nevertheless. In the frailty and weakness of the cross of Christ, God manifests his life-giving power and redemption to sinners.

This is why Paul wanted to know nothing but Christ and him crucified.

This was Paul's divine vocation, to manifest the sufferings of Christ, as Paul says. This is why he can say that, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I fill up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body that is the church" (Col. 1:24). And this is why James could say, counterintuitively, "Count it all joy my brothers when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness" (James 1:2).

What Job tells us, what Paul and James tell us, is that there is a category of suffering that is not the direct consequence of sin. Rather, it is the prism through which God reveals his power in our weakness. He does that chiefly through Christ. But God also does it secondarily through us, not for redemptive purposes as he did through Christ, but ultimately for revelatory purposes, so that he can manifest the power of his wisdom and might in Christ in *our* weakness, in *our* suffering.

In this respect, the way that God manifests his power is very counterintuitive to the way that we as human beings believe that power should be manifested. We think that power should be manifested with the flexed arm, the clenched fist, the gritting of the teeth, or through superior firepower—not in weakness, not in suffering. This is why Paul ultimately calls the gospel, "foolishness." When we preach it, we preach the weakness of the cross and its suffering and shame unto people's salvation (1 Cor. 1:18-25). As we look at God's wisdom literature in the Scriptures, we have to say with the prophet Isaiah, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my way, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8-9).

As we conclude, I want you to remember several things. First of all, if you find yourself in the midst of suffering, your suffering could be the result of three things. It could be the consequence of sin. If you go and willfully pick a fight with somebody and get punched in the nose, then the consequence is a broken nose. That suffering has nothing to do with the cross of Christ, but with your sinful foolishness. I don't recommend it, just to be clear. Secondly, it could be God's fatherly discipline to bring you to repentance. Indeed, the Scriptures teach us that our heavenly Father disciplines those whom he loves. It could be that, because of your repeated brawling, the church finds it necessary to place you under church discipline and keep you from taking the Lord's Supper. But that suffering, if you will, is unto repentance. Christ wants to bring you back through church discipline. The Father wants to bring you back through his loving care.

But you may find yourself suffering, and you cannot connect it to any of the consequences of your sinful actions. Say, for example, illness comes upon you inexplicably or you experience great suffering such as in the life of Job. Then you must remember that this is ultimately God manifesting Christ in you. He is manifesting his power in your weakness. This, beloved in Christ, is ultimately at the heart of the wisdom manifested in Christ and being manifested in you, glorifying the Triune God. You have a divine calling, a vocation, to manifest the weakness and suffering of Christ in your life.

In the absence of clear evidence, never be quick to assume that your own or others' suffering is the consequence of sin, or of God's fatherly, corrective discipline. I'll never forget when I spoke to someone at church who was convinced that someone else's cancer was as the result of hidden and secret sin. Don't make those types of conclusions. Instead, come alongside those suffering like Job. Sit silently and weep alongside them, rather than making rash judgements about what God is or is not doing in their suffering, apart from clear evidence.

And if Christ calls you to take up your cross and follow him, then pray for the eyes of wisdom, pray for the eyes of faith, that you would be able to perceive clearly what God is doing in and through you. I think our immediate and first reaction must be typically, "What did I do wrong?" But it might not be that you did anything wrong. It might be that God has chosen you and identified you as someone special to manifest his power and might through your suffering and weakness, so that you can cry out with the Apostle Paul, "When I am weak, his strength is made perfect in my weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

I close with this prayer, and it's not my own², but nevertheless I found it fitting. Let's bow together in a word of prayer.

“Lord high and holy, meek and lowly, you have brought us to the valley of vision where we live in the depths, but see you in the heights. Hemmed in by mountains of sin, we behold your glory. Let us learn by way of paradox that the way down is the way up, that to be low is to be high. That the broken heart is the healed heart, that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit. That the repenting soul is the victorious soul, that to have nothing is to possess all. That to bear the cross is to wear the crown. That to give is to receive. That the valley is the place of vision. Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from the deepest wells, and

² Adapted from Arthur Bennett, ed. *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), pp. xxiv-xxv.

the deeper the wells, the brighter your stars shine. Let us find your light in our darkness, your life in our death, your joy in our sorrow, your grace in our sin, your riches in our poverty and your glory in our valley.”

We pray these things in the name of Christ, Amen.



CHAPTER 3

THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL WISDOM

MICHAEL S. HORTON | PROVERBS 1:1-7

J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology & Apologetics

Our passage in the faculty’s ongoing series on the wisdom literature is from the opening words of the book of Proverbs:

*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. (Prov. 1:1-7)*

Years ago when an important case came before the Supreme Court, Justice Potter Stewart was asked for a definition of “hard-core pornography.” He replied, “I will not attempt to give a precise, intelligible definition, but I know it when I see it.” You know that the things that are really important, either good or evil, in our lives are really difficult to define. Think of love, how do you define love? And yet it is so important in our lives. Wisdom is that way. How do you define wisdom? What is wisdom? We know it when we see it more easily than we can define it in advance. One reason definition is so difficult is that wisdom is the busy intersection between knowledge and action. Even more than an intersection, wisdom is the skill that turns right knowledge into right action.

We know impulsivity: “Get her done!” Americans are known for their “can-do” spirit. We’re all activists. And that’s our strength; but that’s also our weakness. Albert Einstein said, “Perfection of means and confusion of goals seem—in my opinion—to characterize our age.” We’re the culture of technology. We’re the culture of, not necessarily that form of the knowledge that is wisdom, but that form of knowledge that is “*technē*” – technique, method. We’re only a YouTube click away from being able to have our best life now. But if we remain impulsive, if we remain adolescent in our thinking, then we never really have a goal or purpose, we don’t know why we’re doing things, why we’re creating things, why the technology is there. “Fools despise instruction and knowledge,” our text says.

But if it’s foolish to act without adequate knowledge, it’s also foolish to have that knowledge and to endlessly defer action. You know, you could study the football plays, but then freeze at the hike, instead of actually going out for a pass. But you really know the plays. So foolishness can come in two forms – zeal without knowledge or knowledge without zeal.

And it’s wisdom that turns right understanding into right action. The glue of that is love, and that’s what I think Solomon means here by “fear.” More on that in just a moment. So without a goal, without a purpose, without an end, it’s just the “nowhere man, making all his nowhere plans for nobody.” He doesn’t have a plan, knows not where he’s going, and he is a bit like you and me. We are like that. There is very much of that in ourselves as in our neighbors.

In biblical faith, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, because we’re made in God’s image and God’s likeness. Without that, there is no real *telos* (purpose). How can you tell a good watch? Well, you have to ask what it is for. Is it for throwing at a cat? A watch that doesn’t run well is probably as good an object to throw as anything else. But when you realize that the purpose of a watch is to tell time, you only know if it’s a good watch when it’s doing what it’s made to do. We don’t have any real wisdom about who we are and why we’re here apart from God as our reference point. We’re made in his image and in his likeness. “You have made us for yourself, O Lord,” Augustine prayed, “and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you.” So a wise person has to know about a lot of things. But as a source, the source of all existence is God, and the source of all knowledge is God and his revelation. We can be very skillful fools. Wisdom, our passage reminds us in its opening verses, requires instruction to understand words of insight. That really can’t be done on the Internet, that really can’t be done by jet skiers. You have to submit to instruction

to understand words of insight, and that is what theology is really all about.

Paul encourages Timothy, “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 1:13). Instruction in order to understand sound words, words of insight. But it’s not just receiving instruction, it’s understanding that’s required. We all love it when we get A’s on our papers and exams, but that’s really not the goal.

The goal, ultimately, is understanding, which requires piety. It requires fear of God, respect for God. And I think that closely related to that is love. Not “fear” in the sense of fleeing, but “fear” in the sense of desire. Something that you are attracted to. A chef pursues years and years of becoming really good at the craft, because he or she loves to create a meal. A geologist or a marine biologist loves their field, they love what they study, they love the objects of their study. And the object of our study, theology, is God. It is the fear of God that is really the heart of all of our knowledge and all of our wisdom in any field.

Even many Christians assume that theology is a waste of time. “Fools despise knowledge and understanding,” we’re told here. But many Christians’ motto is “deeds not creeds,” it’s “life not doctrine.” Well, this is the one side of that lack of wisdom where we don’t submit to instruction, we just want to get it done, we just want to know how to apply it to our lives, how to make things work. And that is foolish. Because “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”

But wisdom not only involves instruction and understanding, words of insight. Our text adds that wisdom is to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice and equity. It’s applied wisdom. And when you turn to the Apostle Paul and the way he treats wisdom in the first three chapters of Romans, he blames the moral depravity of the Gentile world on bad theology. They knew God by nature, but weren’t thankful. They didn’t respond to God or relate to God as the source of everything, so they began to worship the creature rather than the Creator. They became what they worshipped. They became stupid animals, just like the creatures that they worshipped, living on gut instinct, without any *telos*, or any higher goal than immediate gratification. But that’s what happens when you separate knowledge from wisdom, and both from God. These qualities that Solomon mentions here—understanding, fidelity, love and mercy—are precisely the characteristics that Paul in Romans 1 says the Gentiles lack. When you give up the fear of God, when you give up the worship of God, wisdom and knowledge just fall apart. Where is all the wisdom and all the knowledge we’ve lost in information? We are inundated

with information: just turn on your radio, listen to the news or watch it or read it. We're inundated with data all the time, constantly, and we don't know how to interpret it. We don't know how it all fits in with the bigger plot of God's wisdom.

So wisdom is that busy intersection between knowledge and action. If it's foolish to act without adequate knowledge, it's also foolish to be mere hearers of the Word and not respond accordingly. And so, just as the Jews in Paul's audience there in Rome are cheering as he's taking on the stupid Gentiles, he turns to his own people and says that they actually have become an obstacle, that because of them, God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles. They claim to have Judeo-Christian values, or at least the Judeo part. But look at the way they live – just like the Gentiles.

Godly wisdom requires knowledge and acknowledgement. And the goal of all instruction, according to verse 2, is, “to give prudence to the simple, to the young man, knowledge and discretion.” Prudence, knowledge and discretion. Prudence is a really important subset of wisdom. You have to have prudence in order to have wisdom. If you are a fundamentalist or a liberal, you can just make a rule or break a rule. The world is very simple for you. It's all black and white, it's all really easy. You don't have to exercise wisdom, you just have to have a list of things to do and not do, a list of things to believe and not believe; and then it's all done, all taken care of for you. But you never grow up. Prudence is a muscle you never exercise. Wisdom has to be exercised. It has to be informed, but it also has to be exercised. And prudence is that skill of looking around at the circumstances when a biblical principle can be applied in all sorts of different ways. When the question isn't between right and wrong, but between better and best.

We talk about the difference between elements and circumstances in worship, for example. With respect to corporate worship, first you have elements, clearly laid down in the Bible. Those are black and white. But then there are a lot of circumstances. What do we do in this case, what do we do in that case? What do we do when the Bible doesn't lay down clearly, by good and necessary consequence, what must be done, what must be believed. That's where wisdom steps in. Wisdom is not free from God's Word, not free from knowledge and understanding; but it is an application of the Word when the Scripture doesn't lay out black and white alternatives. So the goal of character is to develop habits of picking up on both general, biblical wisdom, and in particular, immediate contexts, to know both well. And the more you do it well,

the better you become.

We know a prudent person when we see one. “A fool’s wrath,” Solomon says later, “is known at once, but a prudent man covers shame” (Prov. 12:16 NKJV). Everybody knows the guy who is always angry and shooting his mouth off. “The heart of the prudent acquires knowledge and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge” (Prov. 18:15). And so that is a lot of what you are doing here in seminary. You are learning to make right distinctions, to “rightly divide the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15 KJV), and that takes prudence, circumspection, discretion.

Despite quite different stories, the Bible and the pagan philosophers agree that everybody is born with a conscience, but not everybody is born with wisdom. Wisdom is one of those things that has to be acquired. Jerusalem and Athens agree on this. For example, Aristotle said that wisdom is not something that you can just get off the street, it’s not something you’re born with. It’s something that you have to have inculcated, that you have to exercise over time. Here is what Aristotle says, “Whereas young people become accomplished in geometry and mathematics and wise within these limits, prudent young people do not seem to be found today.” (Yes, the oldsters have always been picking on the youth.) The reason, he says, is that prudence is concerned with particulars as well as universals. And particulars become known from experience, but a young person lacks experience since some length of time is needed to produce it. And so to acquire wisdom, you have to have prudence, and in order to have prudence, you have to have time plus a skilled community to grow up in. Others who are older have had more time and have become skilled practitioners, and that’s why you have apprenticeships in all sorts of different fields. And that’s why we should increasingly think of our churches as places of apprenticeship. So, too, our passage tells us, similar to Aristotle’s advice, “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.” Similarly Proverbs 9:9, “Instruct the wise and they will become wiser still, teach the righteous and they will add to their learning.”

It’s sort of like the rich become richer: the more money you have, the more money you make. And it’s the same with wisdom. It’s like learning a language, or riding a bike, or playing the piano. It takes time, and it takes time belonging to a particular community that’s been riding bikes or playing pianos for a long time. When you get good at it, when you become competent, you don’t have to stare at your fingers on the keyboard, you just play the music. And you

don't have to stare at the handlebars, but you're riding your bike. It takes a while. Increasingly, we don't have communities of virtue in this society. We have talking heads with extreme views, issuing groundless anathemas across the table at each other. On so-called "news programs" the world is very simple for such people, they don't need to acquire wisdom. Not even knowledge. Maybe data, but not knowledge. We feel that we don't ever need to really study an issue, to reflect on the options, to evaluate the data or examine the precedence of wise people who have gone before us. We already know what is right and wrong. And those are the only decisions to be made in life, the ones that are either right or wrong. Again, think of Einstein's description, "Perfection of means and confusion of goals." That defines the American character.

Our text concludes with a re-orientation on that very point. The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God. The finish line of all knowledge is also the starting line. The fear of God – "hallowed be thy name" – that's how our days begin, that's how our days end. Whatever we're thinking, whatever we're working on, whatever we're studying, whatever we're doing, it starts with "hallowed be thy name" and finishes with "hallowed be thy name." We're searching with passion not just to get the right answers, but to follow after that good, true and beautiful object of our study – God himself.

But ultimate wisdom is not just acquired by virtuous habits; it's a gift of grace. The highest, ultimate wisdom is something that we can't acquire. It's something that can only be given to us. Paul has told us in Romans 1 and 2 that there is a wisdom implanted in human nature and a display of God's divine power in the universe around us. But the highest wisdom comes not from looking around, but from listening. A herald announces something we could never find on our own or even in a virtuous community. The gospel is a strange announcement that only the church – this particular community – can know and proclaim to others. And that's why the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. The external Word comes to us. That's how faith is given to us. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ. And so Paul says in 1 Corinthians, "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar now? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1 Cor. 1:20-21). Paul is not taking back everything that he said in Romans 1 and 2. He's not taking back everything he said about there being genuine, natural knowledge, natural revelation. Nor is he rejecting the wisdom that the Holy Spirit himself distributes throughout pagan cultures according to his common grace. What he is saying is that even though the Law makes sense

to human wisdom and the Law makes us wise in things below, only the gospel reconciles sinners to God.

It seems crazy to say that God justifies the wicked. Isn't the purpose of wisdom to make the wicked to be wicked no longer? Aren't you intercepting that process by saying that God justifies the wicked? And Paul adds that, "Because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'" (1 Cor. 1:30-31). So ultimately everything is from him and to him and through him. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, and the best place to begin with the fear of God, the root of the fear of God, is the gospel. Because Jesus Christ ultimately is the wisdom from God. And this is why Paul could say that Christ is the summit of true wisdom in 1 Corinthians. He not only instructs us in righteousness; he is our righteousness. He not only inculcates holiness by his example; he is our holiness. He not only shows us the path to the good life; he is our redemption from sin and misery. And so let him be your wisdom, your righteousness and your redemption even today. Let us pray:

Father, we know that all true wisdom comes from you. Even though we distort it in our sinful and rebellious hearts, it's there all around us. The way you have made things just works. And so we thank you for that wisdom that is still there in common grace and general revelation. We thank you for that wisdom that we can receive even from someone like Aristotle, wisdom that agrees on so many points with what we read in Proverbs. And yet, Father, we know that ultimately that wisdom of which Solomon spoke was of his own descendant, who was to sit on his throne forever, the One who comes from you as your wisdom in very essence, incarnate for us and for our salvation. So, Father, as we read the wise, as we read the scholars, as we listen to the debaters of this age, we pray that we will never lose sight of Jesus Christ, from whom we receive fear of you, reverence for you, and love, desire and passion for knowing you better. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.



CHAPTER 4

FLEEING SEDUCTION, FINDING SATISFACTION

JOSHUA J. VAN EE | PROVERBS 5

Associate Professor of Hebrew & Old Testament

Dear Heavenly Father, as we look at your Word and your instruction, especially on our life as sexual beings, we pray that you will give us insight and that you will ever guard our steps and direct them to the paths of fulfillment that you have given to us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

We're looking this morning at Proverbs chapter five, one of the instructions in the first part of the book of Proverbs. It is a warning against the wiles of the adulterous or strange woman, as we'll see, but also a celebration of the joys of marriage. This translation is compiled from a few different sources, so it may be a little more colorful than others at points. Hear God's word in Proverbs chapter five.

*My son, listen carefully to my wisdom;
give ear to my good sense,
so that you may keep your wits about you,
and your lips may guard knowledge.
For the lips of the strange woman drip honey,
and her mouth is smoother than oil,
but what she brings about is bitter as wormwood,
sharp as a two-edged sword.
Her feet go down to death;
her steps hold fast the path to Sheol;
As for the path of life, lest she ponder it,
her ways wander, she does not know.
And now, sons, listen to me,
and do not turn aside from the words of my mouth.*

*Keep your way far from her,
and do not go near the door of her house,
lest you give your honor to others
and your years to the cruel,
lest strangers take their fill of your strength,
and your labors go to the house of an outsider,
and at your end you groan,
when your flesh and body are spent,
and you say, "How I hated discipline,
and my heart despised reproof!
I did not listen to the voice of my teachers
or give ear to my instructors.
How quickly I have become in utter ruin
in the midst of the assembly and congregation."
Drink water from your own cistern,
flowing streams from the midst of your own well.
Your springs break forth abroad,
canals of water in the streets.
They are for you alone,
and not for strangers with you.
May your fountain be blessed,
so you take pleasure from the wife of your youth,
May she be a loving doe, an alluring female ibex.
May her breasts quench your thirst at all times;
May you stumble about always in her loving.
Why should you stumble about, my son, with a strange woman
and embrace the bosom of an outsider?
For a man's ways are before the eyes of the LORD,
and he ponders all his paths.
His iniquities ensnare him;
he is held fast in the cords of his sin.
He dies for lack of discipline,
and because of his great folly he stumbles about.*

Our text belongs to the first part of the book of Proverbs, chapters 1 through 9, which we usually call the prologue, presented as the instructions of a father to a son. After this prologue come the Proverbs proper, the sentence proverbs and longer ones in chapters 10 and following. As you read this prologue, what

is the father trying to teach his son? Well, at first reading, the main points don't seem that complex. Don't steal. Don't murder. Don't commit adultery. Some very basic things. Yet the father continually presses on the son the need to strive and persevere in the pursuits of this wisdom. Why is that?

One commentator, Michael Fox, says “the reason that the wisdom the author is seeking to impart is at once difficult and obvious is that it is not reducible to the book's precepts,” such as, “Don't commit adultery.” “The author is aiming at a higher and harder goal: wisdom as power... an inner light that guides its possessor through life.”³ The focus of these chapters is on the temptations that men face from other sinful men and seductive women. He says, “Seduction is the main (indeed, almost the only) peril warned against in the lectures.” And the wisdom needed “is the ability to discern right from wrong and also the desire to pursue the right.” So this wisdom is really moral character and that's why it's difficult, “for moral character comes down to desiring the right things, and how do you teach desire?”⁴

What is the father doing here as he seeks to mold the desire? Well, I think it's helpful that he does more than quote God's law. But he also does more than what Heidelberg Catechism question and answer 86 explains, “Why do we still do good? Out of gratitude.” Those are important things, but here the sagacious father does something else. What we see him do instead is to focus on act and consequence, in vivid detail, compelling detail. Fox says, “the father's pedagogical rhetoric aims at guiding desire: fostering the right ones, suppressing the wrong ones.... He strips matters down to essentials and assigns to wisdom one primary function: to fortify its possessor against temptation.”⁵ Then Fox continues:

The youth addressed in Proverbs is about to come into independence and adult responsibilities, yet he lacks maturity and good sense. His moral cast is not yet hardened.... The author knows that young men... are terribly vulnerable to peer pressure and their own raging libidos, and he is aware that the longings for camaraderie and sexual relief tug at them with a fearsome power that can easily overwhelm their still precarious powers of reason and self-control. And thus the lectures seek to help young men withstand these

³ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1—9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible vol. 18A) (New York: Doubleday, 2000), p. 347.

⁴ Fox, *Proverbs 1—9*, p. 348.

⁵ Fox, *Proverbs 1—9*, p. 348.

drives and channel them to proper uses, namely, concern for a good mate and marital sex.... The teacher seeks to connect deed with consequence deep in the son's mind, so that he not only knows the principle of reward and punishment, he feels it. ⁶

I think Fox is helpful in his analysis. One last comment from him. He says of the father that he “speaks to the budding adult in a confidential, man-to-man tone, alerting him to the pull of greed, conformity, and above all, lust, with the vividness that reveals his own nagging susceptibility to their attractions.” He knows his own failings, his own weaknesses. “A wise man is not devoid of such desires and he doesn't demand that his son be.” ⁷ An important point as we approach our text.

So now to turn to our passage, we will break it into two parts, fleeing seduction and then finding satisfaction.

FLEEING SEDUCTION

The father starts by exhorting his son to listen carefully, stretch out his ear to his wisdom, his good sense, his understanding. Something more than just hearing. It has to become internalized. And why is that? He gives two reasons in verse two: to keep your wits about you (often translated as “keep discretion”) and to guard knowledge. Discretion and knowledge are key for the youth. Proverbs 1:4 says that “wisdom gives knowledge and discretion to the youth.” The term discretion, which I have translated as “keep your wits about you,” often refers to a plan, whether good or evil. It's that internal ability to think clearly about a situation and to know what is of benefit and how to go about pursuing it, to not be carried along by the circumstances, to see the consequences. So I think “keep your wits about you” very much captures that. And if you can do that, then you won't be tossed to and fro, justifying anything in the situation. Your lips, they won't just babble. But there will be knowledge.

Why is it important to keep your wits? Well, because there is someone who comes along. A good looking, sweet talking woman. We know what she does to a man. We've all seen it in movies, on TV shows, taking a perfectly sensible guy and turning him into a babbling idiot. Men are very susceptible to feminine charms. So the father is telling his son that he needs to learn how to keep his wits when that happens, when he's faced with this, when this woman comes by.

⁶ Fox, *Proverbs* 1—9, pp. 348-349.

⁷ Fox, *Proverbs* 1—9, p. 350.

Now, it is important to emphasize that the father is not condemning that aspect of what women do to men. That is not at all what it is. But it's the wrong woman. The same terminology, "the lips (of the strange woman) drip honey," is used in Song of Songs, by the lover talking of his beloved: "your lips drip honey" (Song 4:11). This is a good thing. But it's wrong, it's out of place, when the lips belong to a strange woman. The sexual allurements, "smoother than oil," is not a bad thing. But here it's out of place.

Now this term "strange woman" may just mean "strange" or it can be translated "foreign, forbidden." There has been much discussion of the woman's identity. Is she a foreigner as far as nationality? The same term is connected in verse 20 with another word for a foreigner, which I translated as "outsider." However, a focus on nationality doesn't seem to make sense here. Instead, the term can be used for those outside of the family, the circle of the clan, the immediate family. And thus here, as it speaks about sexuality, it's any woman that's outside of the proper bounds of a man's sexuality. It's really any other woman than his wife. That's the strange woman. Now, in Israelite society, most of the time, it was probably another man's wife. And as we look elsewhere in Proverbs, where we have similar exhortations to us, it is always of somebody who is married.

Here in Proverbs 5, we don't hear what the honeyed words are. We can look to chapter seven, and there we get more of a demonstration of what the woman says. But the brief imagery shows the son that her words are powerful. They are alluring. They are very desirous. But you need to know where it ends. You need to know the consequences. So that's what the father goes into in verses 4 through 6, giving the consequences in very general terms. As we read through them, we may think they are cosmic or long-term consequences, that these might be eternal terms that speak of death and Sheol or, by contrast, the path of life. However, based on their appearances elsewhere in Proverbs, these terms characterize this period of life here on earth. This strange woman and her sexuality will take you away from what is good and pleasant in this life. There will be consequences. Sexuality is this good thing, but taken out of proper context it doesn't lead to fulfillment. It doesn't lead to happiness, to the pleasure that God created and formed.

We see this result illustrated in verses 7 through 14, where more specifics are mentioned. He talks now to his sons—he uses the plural: "Don't turn aside from my words." But what they do need to get away from is this woman herself. That's the surest way to avoid the dire consequences. Stay away. Don't go near

her door. Don't pretend that you are stronger than you are. Know the power of sensuality and don't flirt with danger.

Then he gives the reasons why. This section may be the toughest to understand, to know exactly what is being described. Basically, you'll lose most everything in life. Proverbs talks about all of these individuals: strangers, the cruel one, outsiders. All of these terms are masculine. They are probably referring to consequences of adultery in Israel and how it would lead to loss of property and possessions and other things. We can say in general that he "loses the family farm." And what is he then reduced to?

We hear him cry out in verse 11: "At your end you groan when your flesh and body are spent." You look back at your life, at what has happened; the shipwreck that you have made of your life because of your indiscretions. And you say, "How I hated discipline and my heart despised reproof! I didn't listen to the voice of my teachers, or give ear to my instructors." Your actions have brought about not only bodily and material ruin, but also ruin of reputation. Verse 14: "How quickly I've become an utter ruin in the midst of the assembly and the congregation!" He's crying out, "How could I be so stupid and not listen?" because he's now in disgrace.

FINDING SATISFACTION

Then the father makes a jump. Now that he's brought the son face to face with the utter ruin that a life of fornication would bring, he dives without introduction into the alternative. And the answer to sexual temptation is not an emptying of desire. It's not the monastery. It's the bedroom. It's not a condemnation of feminine wiles but their celebration in marriage. In verses 15 through 18 he uses a number of images referring to sources of water. A rather obvious metaphor that is finally made explicit in verse 18 as "take pleasure from the wife of your youth."

The one difficulty in them is how to fit in verse 16, whether it's portraying something good or bad. Interpreted as something bad, verse 16 is often taken as contrasting with 15 and 17. Verse 15 states, "Drink from your own cistern, flowing streams from the midst of your own well," a private expression of sexuality with your own wife. Then 16 is taken as a description of being out in the public with your sexuality, abroad in the streets. And verse 17 is taken as a command: "They should be for you alone, not for strangers with you." Most English translations follow this interpretation, understanding verse 16 as a negative image, often making it into a rhetorical question (should it be this

way?) even though there aren't any indicators of a question. But I'm convinced by those who argue that verse 16 is a positive thing, another reference to the wife using an image of water. It's talking about her great abundance. The images of water in 15 and 16 get better and better. A cistern is something dug out to catch rainwater. A sure source, but not as good as a well that's fed by underground rivers and streams. Flowing water in a good well, but still not as good as an actual spring, breaking out with canals, channels in the streets. That is the abundance found in a wife.

And thus verse 17 isn't a command but a statement. This blessing, all of it, is for you alone. It's not to be shared with strangers, strange men. And then the father pronounces this blessing on the wife, "May your fountain"—again the imagery of water—"May she be blessed." The latter part of 18 is often taken as an imperative, which would fit, but I think it's better to take it here as a result (an indirect volitive for those of you looking at your Hebrew). If she is blessed from God, "May your fountain be blessed," this will happen. You will take pleasure. You will take joy in and take pleasure from the wife of your youth.

Verse 19 continues the father's blessing. "May she be a doe of loves—a lovemaking doe, a lovely doe. May she be an ibex of charm—an alluring ibex, an attractive ibex." And then he goes back again to the idea of drinking, though here something a little bit stronger than just water, "may her breasts quench your thirst at all times, may you stumble about always in her loving." Often the latter term refers to being intoxicated, the idea of staggering, stumbling about. Your wife should make you weak in the knees. The alluring nature of a woman is a great thing in the marriage bed. Therefore, the father asks in verse 20, "If you have all of that at home, why are you going elsewhere? Why would you ever look elsewhere? Why would you stagger about with strange women? Why would you embrace these foreign women?"

I don't think he has any naiveté about marriage always being the easy answer. We have to remember that most Israelites probably had arranged marriages. At a very young age they had to learn how to love each other, to look to each other. There may even be here an attack on polygamy. "Enjoy the wife of your youth." Don't keep your eyes roaming round about looking for another. But the father, despite all those difficulties that I am sure he knows of, he's praying that his son's marriage will be the blessing that God made it to be. He knows marriage takes work on both sides. And he knows that sex can be one of the most common areas of conflict. He also knows it's worth it. It's worth cultivating. It's worth working at. It's worth making the marriage bed that place of mutual pleasure

because it will guard both of you from temptation. And it will be a lot of fun.

The father ends in verses 21 through 23 with instructions on sin that are more general in character. However, they are still very applicable to sexual sin. “For a man’s ways, they are always before the Lord.” What you think you do in secret, what you hide, is not in secret. God knows. God ponders. And those secret sins, they usually don’t stay secret. Instead they come out in our lives. There are consequences. They wreck homes and everything else. Iniquities ensnare a man. They hold him fast in the cords of his sin. He dies from lack of discipline. He stumbles about, not with his wife, but because of his folly.

So as we hear these words and apply them to ourselves briefly, we know that the issues are the same, even if some of the circumstances are different. What things drip honey for you? What things promise and even give you some level of sexual pleasure. What’s the cost? Adultery is still very much rampant in our culture. Also various forms of infidelity. But maybe the biggest difference between ancient Israel and our time is that today the “strange woman” may not be your neighbor’s wife in the flesh. She may be the one on the screen.

And in our culture, adultery doesn’t have the same social stigma as in Israel. Certainly sexual promiscuity does not. But the consequences are still there. Ask anybody who has gone through divorce, as usually ends up happening. It is costly and painful, especially if there are kids involved. And even those casual hookups, whether real or with images, have very lasting consequences: emotional pain, emptiness, guilt. This is not the way to life. This is not the path of life. We all know how too often sexual sins have destroyed a pastor’s ministry, leaving him and the church in disgrace. And we could say that even though this passage is given from the father to the son, it’s pretty easy to see that it applies also to daughters. Sexual temptation may be different for women; but it’s still real, as are the consequences.

So, both men and women, we need to look to the marriage bed. It is this great gift. A place for enjoyment, passion, love. But it needs to be part of a greater intimacy, to share in the rest of life. And it needs to be something cultivated. Wives may not always feel that they are this abundant source that Proverbs speaks about. They may not always feel like that lovely doe or alluring ibex. But this is a blessing from God, and they need to pray for it. Husbands often have a very big role in that, in building up their wives, bringing out their inner lovely doe, alluring ibex, through their care and love.

But I know that some of you are not married yet. And so your sexual passions and desires don’t have an appropriate place yet for expression, fulfillment. Some

of you may be gifted for singleness as Paul talks about. I imagine most are not. And so you need to now guard yourself, join with other brothers or sisters, join together for that mutual support. But also pray for a wife, a husband. Proverbs says in 18:22, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord.” That is true. It’s one of those things I’m most anxious about my own children, that they find godly spouses as they grow up.

But lastly, the most amazing thing, as we place these instructions from Proverbs within the canon of Scripture, is that God, before whom all of this transpires, who sees all, ponders all, is the God who loves sexual sinners, who has loved them so much that he has provided a way of salvation. It doesn’t mean there won’t be consequences in this life. But it means that God can take you, a broken one who has made a shipwreck of your life, he can make you new again. And he can give you a sure and lasting hope. Turn in repentance and faith to Jesus Christ our faithful savior, who has given his life to pay for such sinners as us. Let us pray.

Dear heavenly Father, your law and your wisdom and your instruction all show us our need for a savior. But they also build us up as we see what we are now called to, to walk in the joy and the freedom that we have. So as we think of how you have made us as sexual beings, we pray that we would take these words and internalize them. That you would use them when we are faced with temptation, to keep our wits. So that we may be spared this pain, this agony, that comes about because of sin. So guard us from that. May we know our ways are always before you. May that constantly be on our mind. May we also know that we can always turn in repentance for sin that we have committed. And would you by your Spirit continue to make us new. We pray this in Jesus’ name, Amen.



CHAPTER 5

SUFFICIENCY AND SATISFACTION

JOEL E. KIM | PROVERBS 30:7-9

President & Assistant Professor of New Testament

Since many of you are heading into financially lucrative careers, this morning I wanted to speak to you about money, from the book of Proverbs, turning to chapter 30, verses 7 through 9:

*Two things I ask of you;
deny them not to me before I die:
Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
give me neither poverty nor riches;
feed me with the food that is needful for me,
lest I be full and deny you
and say, “Who is the LORD?”
or lest I be poor and steal
and profane the name of my God.*

In the midst of the sayings of Agur, we find this petition, “Two things I ask of you, deny them not to me before I die,” he says. As some scholars have rightly pointed out, these petitions resemble those found in the Lord’s Prayer, and focus on two major themes in the Proverbs: speech and money.

There is no denying that the first petition is an important one, when he says in verse 8, “Remove far from me falsehood and lying.” Speaking takes up a lot of space in the book of Proverbs, partly because there is nothing like speaking, and perhaps not speaking, that displays wisdom and advertises folly.

Yet, as important as this topic is for those of us who speak for a living, the focus of the prayer is on the second petition, found in the second half of verse 8, where he says, “Give me neither poverty nor riches, feed me with the food that is needful for me.” It is this prayer that is stated both negatively and positively; and moreover, unlike the first petition, attached to this prayer are the reasons

for the prayer, which are given in verse 9. To this latter petition we turn this morning, focusing on two ideas, sufficiency and satisfaction.

The first theme is that of sufficiency. He says, “Give me neither poverty nor riches, feed me with the food that is needful to me.” Proverbs speaks often about wealth and poverty, and it does so in realistic and balanced ways. It often depicts wealth as a blessing of God reserved for those who are wise, but Proverbs also recognizes that fools sometimes gain wealth. And in fact the sage goes on to say that, though it may be only for a short time, fools might actually enjoy the riches of God’s blessings. Proverbs also states that foolish behavior often leads to poverty. But the book also acknowledges that wisdom and wealth do not always go hand in hand, and often they are in opposition to one another. To sum up over-simplistically: Proverbs is basically saying, wealth is good, but wisdom is better. “How much better to get wisdom than gold,” he says, “to get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver” (Prov. 16:16).

However, what interests us this morning in this present passage is that instead of the “either/or” that characterized the passages on wealth—*either* wealth or poverty—what we have here is a “neither/nor.” *Neither* wealth, *nor* poverty. In other words, the prayer focuses not on the alternatives of abundance on the one hand, and want or lack on the other. It focuses on sufficiency. The prayer asks for neither riches nor poverty, but what is “needful for me.” Not more, not less.

What is needful to me may be different from one person to another based on his or her calling and circumstances. For example, whether one is single or married may affect how much we need. We may remember the narrative in Exodus 16 where the Lord provided bread in the form of the dew on the ground and the Israelites were commanded to gather as much as they could eat. What was their response? They gathered, some more, some less, according to the needs of the family. Here the wisdom is the ability to know what is sufficient for us, what we need and not what we want. Moreover, wisdom is the maturity to pray for sufficiency, being able to say simply, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Not more, not less. In 1 Timothy 6:8, Paul recounts his own dealings with money, and in a surprising statement he says, “But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.” I’m sure many of us have read those words. I’m sure many of us have reflected upon those words. But I’m not exactly sure how many of us actually *mean* those words when we say them.

This is where the second half of the petition becomes important for us. For he says, “Lest I be full and deny you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or lest I be poor

and steal and profane the name of God” (Prov. 30:9). What motivated Agur’s prayer recorded in verse 8? This is clearly a prayer of a sinner who understands himself and his capacity for sin. He states his motivation for asking for just enough, not too much and not too little, in this way: When he has more than enough, he becomes self-satisfied. That’s what he becomes. Rather than giving thanks to the One who gives all gifts and blessings, he denies God. “Who is the Lord?” he says, convinced that he has done it for himself.

Often in ministry, when the subject of giving comes up in Bible studies or sermons and discussions of tithing take place, someone will raise his hand earnestly and ask, “Should we tithe on pre- or post-tax income?” But that precisely misses the point. That betrays the person’s thought, or at least the thought process, that anything that we possess in some way ultimately belongs to us, and not to God. What we need to see is that we are not giving a portion of our possessions to the Lord; we are giving back to the Lord what is rightfully his.

Agur knows how many ways his heart goes wrong. When he enjoys abundance, he is tempted to self-satisfaction. When he has less than he needs, he drowns in self-remorse and complaint. Rather than growing in greater dependence on God for his sustenance, he steals, no longer convinced that God can and will provide. So he defames the name of God, blaming him for the circumstances.

Perhaps it is worth noting that the first prayer, the prayer that asks God to protect us from sinning in our speech, “Remove far from me falsehood and lying,” is not so separate from the discussion on wealth and poverty after all. Agur asks for protection from lying, either out of greed, or out of need. But lest you think that somehow this kind of sense of greed is only for those who are in need, let me point out that the explicit greed problem that we have is not about plenty or want, being rich or poor. It is a condition of the heart common in all of us, whether we have much or not. Greed hides itself from the victim, we are told.

Tim Keller, in his book, *Counterfeit Gods*, asks this question, “Why can’t anyone in the grip of greed see it?” In fact, from all of the sins mentioned in Scripture, this is the one that most people do not recognize in themselves. One of the reasons he gives has some plausible reasoning to it. Keller writes,

The counterfeit god of money uses powerful sociological and psychological dynamics. Everyone tends to live in a particular socio-economic bracket. Once you are able to afford to live in a particular neighborhood, send your

children to its schools, and participate in its social life, you will find yourself surrounded by quite a number of people who have more money than you. You don't compare yourself to the rest of the world, you compare yourself to those in your bracket. The human heart always wants to justify itself, and this is one of the easiest ways.⁸

I remember one time when I was traveling in Southeast Asia with Lloyd Kim, who is now the coordinator of the Presbyterian Church in America's Mission to the World. Lloyd reminded me that, in comparison to our brothers whom we were meeting there, those of us who were Americans were like Bill Gates to them, in terms of the earning potential that we have and the money that we actually possess. So here, this sense of greed and this desire for more is not simply about having or not having. What this prayer, especially the second half of the prayer, highlights for us is an important perspective on money, that our relationship with money has a spiritual component. Both abundance and lack of money expose and excite sin in us. Whether we are tempted by affluence to congratulate ourselves, or by deficiency to flagellate ourselves, either way, it's ultimately about us. The issue of money provides a window into our heart condition. With abundance comes comfort and trust in wealth, placing security and satisfaction in something other than God. With need and lack come bitterness and longing, placing security and significance in something other than God. Ultimately, either way, we are dissatisfied with God. Here, with our longing comes dissatisfaction.

In fact, the Apostle Paul again in 1 Timothy 6, in the passage that follows the one that I quoted a few minutes ago, goes on to say, "But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation" (verse 9). A part of the reason he says this is that he is not only speaking to the rich among those who receive the letter, but also to others. He has just referred to false teachers in Ephesus, describing them as "those who are seeking godliness as a means of gain" (verse 5). Their apparently godly actions are motivated not by love of God and others but by greed since they imagine that godliness is the means by which they can gain, wealth in particular. This is why he is able to say, "But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith,

⁸ Timothy J. Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 52-53.

and pierced themselves with many pangs” (verses 9—10). This is the direct connection that the apostle makes between money and our spiritual condition. This is the reason Agur’s prayer is for neither abundance nor want, but simply sufficiency in life.

Now, as we talk about the connection between wealth and our spiritual condition, some of you may be saying to yourselves—and I would include myself at times—that we don’t have that problem. We don’t have that dissatisfaction regarding God’s provisions for us. Perhaps this is where a diagnosis is necessary for us, and perhaps asking the question that Paul David Tripp, in his little article called “Grumbling – A Look at a Little Sin,” might be beneficial for us. He says,

You know, we live with grumbling all the time. Isn’t it amazing that we human beings can stand in front a closet full of clothes and say we don’t have a thing to wear? Or stand in front of a refrigerator full of food and say there’s nothing to eat? We’re angry at the food and go on diets because we’re convinced that anything that ever tasted good is fattening. Isn’t it remarkable that we have wonderful activity-filled lives full of meaning and purpose, and we grumble that we’re way too busy? Or that we can look at everything that exists and find some reason to complain? Grumbling may seem like a little thing—a little sin—but I would like to propose to you that grumbling is a pollutant in the waters of your heart. It will kill life.”⁹

I think he’s right. In this passage, we’re reminded that the Lord provides for our needs and for our satisfaction. Agur’s prayer is that we be satisfied in God and God alone. This is where Paul comes and reminds us in 1 Timothy 6:6 that “godliness with contentment is great gain.” What is contentment? Perhaps this is over-simplistic, but we can define it as an attitude of the heart, formed by the Spirit, that accepts and delights in God’s wise and fatherly providence in every condition and circumstance of our lives. It’s not about our concocted wants that are greater than what we need, or less than what we need out of humility. It’s simply seeking from the Lord what we need to be sufficient.

Paul’s point simply is, that as Agur has done, that we approach God trusting in his care and to ask for those things that are sufficient for us. Just as importantly, recognizing that these things reveal our hearts, that we be satisfied in him and him alone. It’s actually believing the kind of promise given to us

⁹ Paul David Tripp, “Grumbling—A Look at a ‘Little’ Sin,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 18/2 (2000), 47.

in Romans chapter 8, when he says, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” He goes on to point out, “If he did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:31—32) Paul did not ask the question to us, “Will God not graciously give us all things?” Because my guess is that you and I have a list of things that have yet to be answered. Here, we could have said that there are many things that God has yet to provide, an equivocal answer at best. But notice what Paul does here. He first points out the costliness of our redemption, “He who did not spare his own Son.” In saving us, God went to the limit. What more could he have given for us? We cannot know the pain felt by the Father and Jesus upon Calvary, yet we can say this: If the measure of love is what it gives, then there never was such love as God showed to us sinners at Calvary, and there never will be. The first point makes the question possible; arguing from the greater to the lesser, Paul says, “All things will be given.” Having given his Son, everything else that we might be complaining about pales in comparison, in spite of our protests. Here, the Proverbs remind us that indeed as we come before God, God is adequate for us. He satisfies us, and he provides for our sufficiency.

May the Lord bless you and me this morning and in the days to come, that we may have the wisdom to seek sufficiency before the Lord. Give us this day our daily bread, and to trust fully that the Lord will satisfy, because God is sufficient. Let’s turn to the Lord in prayer:

Father, we confess to you that our circumstances dictate how we feel and think, perhaps even in our prayers lifted up to you. We confess before you, O Lord, that oftentimes our prayers reflect the conditions of our hearts, and generally, as we think through them, they are primarily about us, focused in on ourselves and our needs and our desires. Allow us and teach us by your Spirit, O Lord, to see you and behold a faithful and trustworthy God, who is always sufficient and satisfactory to us. Thank you for your promise to us, O Lord, that he who did not spare his own Son will provide for all our needs. We pray, O Lord, that our hearts may find contentment and give thanks and praises to you for the kind of God you are to us. We thank you for the reminders given to us in the book of Proverbs, and pray that by your Spirit you would grant to us the overabundance of wisdom that only you can provide, that we may live our lives wholly for your glory and honor. For we pray in your Son’s name. Amen.



CHAPTER 6

GOD'S RIGHTEOUS WISDOM

R. SCOTT CLARK | JOB 38:1-7, 42:1-6

Professor of Church History & Historical Theology

Today I want to look at two passages in Job, 38:1-7 and then 42:1-6. I want to meditate with you on Yahweh's righteous wisdom. I'll be reading now from the English Standard Version, replacing the English translation, "the LORD" with God's covenant name in Hebrew, "Yahweh." Hear first Job 38:1-7:

*Then Yahweh answered Job out of the whirlwind and said:
"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
Dress for action like a man;
I will question you, and you make it known to me.
"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone,
when the morning stars sang together
and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"*

Now Job 42:1-6:

*Then Job answered Yahweh and said:
"I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
"Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?"
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
'Hear, and I will speak;*

*I will question you, and you make it known to me.⁷
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.”*

Brothers and sisters, there is scarcely a more difficult problem in all the Christian faith than the problem of evil. I was just dialoguing with a fellow who was struggling with the problem of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. He's in a mainline Methodist denomination, he identifies as a Remonstrant,¹⁰ but he was exploring the other side. It was a cordial discussion, a friendly discussion. We ended up talking about the problem of evil. How is it that God can be absolutely sovereign, yet not responsible for evil?

If God is absolutely sovereign over all things, if he's decreed all things, if all things are comprehended in his providence.... And who could say otherwise? How can you say anything else in the face of the testimony of Holy Scripture? "In the beginning God..." Right? We are not Manicheans; Moses is not a Manichean. Moses doesn't say, "Well, 'in the beginning God' and here's a good principle, and also, alongside it, in the beginning, here's a competing principle, an evil principle. And we'll see how this cosmic struggle turns out." That's not what the Word of God says. But if God is sovereign and utterly good, how can the evil that is so evident in the world and our experience even exist? That is the problem.

If there was no problem of evil, of course, the book of Job wouldn't exist. Romans 9 wouldn't exist. Romans 9 would read rather differently than it does. Romans 9 is very clear that we existentially experience a great problem. To paraphrase Paul, if people do what God has decreed for them from all eternity, how can he hold them morally culpable? And of course Paul gives us this wonderful, if not entirely intellectually satisfying, reply, "Who are you O man, to answer back to God? Cannot the potter make of the clay what he will?" Of course, the expected answer is yes. Potters can do whatever they want with clay.

Now that is heresy to people today. Perhaps there is no greater heresy that you can utter in the modern world than to say that human beings are not

¹⁰ Followers of Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609) "remonstrated against" (objected to) the Reformed churches' doctrine of the sovereignty of God. The Synod of Dort replied to the Remonstrants' position in its Canons (1618–19), one of three Forms of Unity confessed by Reformed denominations and federations to this day.

absolutely ultimate, relative to all other authorities. That goes to the heart of the Modern creed, “Modern” with a capital “M”, or “Modernist.” What do Modern people believe? What have Modern, enlightened people believed since the beginning or middle of the seventeenth century, through the eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth, and to today? We have believed in human perfectibility, essential human goodness and the ability of human beings to will the contrary to God.

Just to give you some parameters in which to think, consider even Pelagius, that great heretic, declared a heretic by the Council of Ephesus in 431. (The council named *Caelestius*, but they were aiming at Pelagius.) Pelagius is declared a heretic against the catholic faith. But even Pelagius didn’t think that we had the ability to will the contrary to God. It is a remarkably Modern paganism that has overtaken the West, in which human beings declare their ability to will the contrary to God.

Now, Job puts us face to face with this problem in a world in which it is inconceivable that human beings have the ability to will the contrary to God. This actually intensifies the problem of evil; it doesn’t relieve it. I want you to feel the weight of this problem. If we go back to the beginning of this book, we read in Job 1:1, “There was a man in the land Uz whose name was Job and that man was blameless and upright.” Well, of course we know that these are not absolute statements. No one has ever been without sin, except Jesus. But relatively Job was “one who feared God and turned away from evil.” And yet, if you go on and read the rest of the chapter, you see that Yahweh essentially taunts Satan with Job’s integrity. And Satan says, “Well of course Job is upright, since everything is going well for him. But let me at him, and let’s see how upright he remains.” And Yahweh permits this. Not bare permission, but a permission of a sort. It’s in the Scriptures.

So, finally, after all of Job’s terrible travails, he finally shakes his fist at God, as we see in chapter 31, and says, “Well all right, Yahweh, I’ve had enough.” Then he makes this plea in chapter 31, having been abused by his counsellors, whom Yahweh says were wrong. His counsellors were wrong, so if you want to learn what not to say to people who are suffering, read Job’s counsellors and then don’t do that. Elihu is an ambiguous case. E. J. Young says he was right, but it was immaterial. That strikes me as an odd thing to say. Elihu was right, but his being right was immaterial. Well, maybe from a pastoral point of view. It’s not always helpful, when you are ministering to people who are suffering, to sit there and say true things. Sometimes they just need you to sit there and

be with them in the midst of their suffering. You have to resist that temptation to unload all that wisdom that you've gained in your first semester of seminary. People are suffering.

Nevertheless, Job raises his fist in chapter 31 and then Elihu unloads on Job and makes people uncomfortable. But if you read Elihu, he basically says the same thing that Yahweh says in chapter 38. And so I think here that Meredith Kline is right, that Elihu is essentially a prologue to Yahweh.

Yahweh answers Job out of the storm. “Whirlwind” is a possible translation, it's one of the translations that is used for this word; but it's just as frequently a storm, and most of the time it is a judgment storm. In other words, God is coming in an ominous and threatening way. So this isn't exactly the whirlwind that takes Elijah, this is a different sort of a threatening storm in which he comes to Job and darkens Job's world in a way. And Yahweh then challenges him and says, “Who is this that darkens counsel?” Which is an interesting expression. You know intuitively what it means: Who is this that is talking about things they don't really understand? Who is this that is saying things that they don't know?

Here we begin to see the difference between wisdom and foolishness. Wisdom knows that it does not know everything, that there are limits creatures can know. Folly, or foolishness, does not respect what I like to call the categorical distinction, the Creator/creature distinction. And it's *that* which Yahweh reasserts in chapters 38 and following. It's really not very complicated. I didn't say that it was easy; I just said it's not very complicated. I didn't say that it's easy to accept, because ultimately Yahweh doesn't really satisfy our quest for understanding of how God can be good, righteous, and sovereign, and how everything can be encompassed in his providence—and it surely is—and yet he's good, and yet there is evil.

What happens to Job is *really evil*. It is not good. Oh, we can mitigate it and say, “Well, it was ultimately good for Job and ultimately everything turns out well at the end of the book.” But if you cheat that way, you miss the point that the reality of suffering is genuine. People really hurt, and it really has terrible consequences. You need to face that, because you are going to face that. If you're not facing it personally, you will face it as a friend, as an elder, as a teacher, as a pastor, in whatever capacity you may serve. Either now or in the future, you will sit with people whom you know to be good people as the world judges things, as we see things, something like Job — upright, fearing God, not lusting, lying, cheating in business, assaulting neighbors or abusing servants, neglecting the

needy or trusting in wealth... (I don't think Job is lying in chapter 31 when he says, "I haven't done all these things.") That's basically correct. And God still allowed Satan to afflict him.

So are we going to raise the fist? This is the spirit of the age really, raising the fist, not just to earthly authorities. To be sure, if you just look at Google News, people are raising the fist to authority constantly. Of course, in so doing, the Apostle Paul says they are really raising their fists to God. They are really challenging God, because God appointed all of those authorities.

"Who is this that darkens counsel by talking about things they don't understand?" So Yahweh says, "If you want to call me to trial, let me ask you a question. I'll accept your challenge, gird yourself (literally, gird your loins)!" "Dress for action" is a polite translation. This is a challenge to get ready for war. When soldiers put on battle gear, that's different from their ordinary uniforms. They put on armor plates. Cops put on armor plates. They gird themselves every day for battle. They have to put on a certain kind of uniform, a certain kind of equipment, bulletproof armor, sometimes if you're a soldier, a helmet. And they put firearms on their sides and mace and batons and handcuffs and all those things that cops and soldiers wear, because they're getting ready to go into battle, and they have to deal with contingencies.

So Yahweh says to Job, "Gird yourself up, get ready for battle. But let me ask you a question, you tell me, first you establish that you have grounds, that you have standing. And then I'll answer your questions. If you can pass this test, then I'll answer your questions. And here's my test for standing: Where were you when I spoke into nothing and made all that was and is?" Some of you have heard me say this before in class, "O that's right, you didn't exist, shut up!"

Wisdom is recognizing and acknowledging and admitting that we're not ultimately equal with God and that we're dust. We are, as Dr. Horton said to me yesterday, sacred dust, to be sure, I like that. We're dust that God animated. We don't have standing to shake our fist at God. This is a lesson you must accept and you must learn. This is practical Calvinism. It's great to be young, restless and Reformed or young, restless and Augustinian, and be thrilled by the doctrines of grace and divine sovereignty. It is! I remember the thrill. I was young, restless and Augustinian once. I remember that. But I also remember sitting in a hospital room with a little boy who had cancer, not once but twice, and now again a third time. He's in his thirties, he's got his third bout of cancer. I watched them kill that boy—all but kill that boy—in a plastic bubble. We had to gown up and wash up to go in, so that we wouldn't infect him and kill

him while they were trying to save his life. What did that boy do to anybody? He has never once shaken his fist at God as far as I know. Because he is a practical Calvinist. He knows that God is sovereign. And it's not just a theory; it's a reality, and that's why he was able to go through all of the terrible, terrible treatments through which they put him. Because he knows in his core that God is good and that God doesn't make mistakes. He knows what Job finally learned in chapter 42: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?'" Job repeats Yahweh's question, and now he replies humbly, "Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful, too transcendent for me, which I did not know. Hear, Yahweh, and I will speak. I will question you, you will make known to me, I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you in all of your terrible glory, in that storm theophany, that manifestation of God in his holiness, his wisdom, his righteousness. And therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

This is a man who knows what he is, and he knows implicitly here now, but foreshadowing, by looking forward, who God is in Jesus Christ. If there was ever anyone who had a right to shake his fist at God, it was Jesus who said, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!*"¹¹" and said it in absolute, unequivocal righteousness. There is no equivocation. Job was relatively righteous. Maybe it was true of Job in chapter 31, that he hadn't done those things. But it was absolutely true of Jesus. And he submitted to his Father for your sake, and for mine. We trust him who trusted in his Father, for us, who obeyed for us.

We don't know all of God's mysterious purposes, or maybe any of them. We don't know the outcome from the beginning. It may be that God has decreed, as he did for some of our forefathers, that we should be covered with pitch, and then set on fire for the sake of Jesus. That might be his providence for us. It may be that his providence for us is that Muslim hordes will burst in to our house, grab us and cut off our heads. That may be. But it is in Jesus Christ that we see his face toward us and we know that whatever his providence is to us, it is good, it is right, it is wisdom. And we despise ourselves and we repent in dust and ashes. That's righteous wisdom. Let us pray:

Father, we give you thanks for Jesus Christ, who did not raise his fist to you but who accepted the awful consequences of our sin, for our sake and for the sake of your

¹¹ "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34).

Name and your glory and your righteousness. You promised that you would always have a people, and so you shall, secured by the obedience, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus. O Lord, forgive us when we have dared raise the fist to you. Forgive us when we have challenged you. And now like Job, we say, "We have darkened counsel, we have said what we do not know." But we do know you in Jesus, and we trust you in Jesus. We accept your providences, both good and difficult, in Jesus. O Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief, for we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.



CHAPTER 7

THE WISDOM GATEWAY TO THE PSALTER

CHARLES K. TELFER | PSALM 1

Professor of Biblical Languages

I invite you to turn with me to Psalm 1:

*Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
He is like a tree
planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.
The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.*

Thus far the reading of God's Word.

Let's bow our hearts in prayer:

Glorious God, we thank you that you have opened the way to new life for us in Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life. We ask that you would clarify and strengthen our faith, and that you would renew our love, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Brothers and sisters well loved by the Lord Jesus, when our Savior was at the beginning of his ministry, calling disciples to himself and being followed by the crowds, he went up on a hill in Galilee and he spoke these same words that begin our Psalm, “*Ashrē ha-ish.*” These are the blessednesses; here is the invitation to the happy life. Matthew records this expression as “*Makarioi*” and Jerome translates this as “*Beati*,” from which we get “beatitudes.” Jesus says, “I will tell you who the happy person is, who the person to be envied really is.” And then in Jesus’ classic form he makes this strange string of declarations: “When people revile you, you’re happy. When people come after you and persecute you, when you have lack, when you suffer, then you are truly one of the fortunate ones *because you’re my disciples.* When you’re poor, when you’re hungry, no matter what it costs you, you come out ahead because you’re my disciple. This is the secret to the happy life.”

Our Lord Jesus is following in a very old tradition when he makes these invitations to the blessed, to the full and happy life. This is the call of the prophets. Isaiah says in chapter 30:18, “The Lord exalts himself to show mercy to you, *blessed are all who wait for him.*” Same expression. And of course, this is the invitation again and again in the wisdom literature. So, for example, in Proverbs 3:13 we have the same expression, “Blessed is the one who finds wisdom and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than the gain from silver, and her profit than gold.”

Don’t you appreciate how Scripture as a whole, from the beginning to the end, always appeals to our self-interest? It’s never, “Follow me and you’ll be the loser in the end; follow me and you’ll miss out on the best things and be miserable.” No, it’s always quite the opposite. The Scripture offers us the best things and appeals to our self-concern. Perhaps the most classic invitation is in Proverbs 8:32—36, where wisdom, personified as a woman, makes the same invitation,

Blessed are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life, and obtains favor from the Lord, but he who fails to find me injures himself, and all who hate me love death.

These faculty devotions are generally taken from the wisdom literature, but it’s worth our time to take a moment to see how the people who gave us our Psalter put a wisdom gate on the front end of it. The entryway into the Psalter

is a wisdom psalm. The compilers of the Book of Psalms want us to read this collection from a wisdom point of view.

It's easy to see how Psalm 1 is very similar to the Proverbs. For example, both focus on moral types. The end of verse 1 talks about the scoffer or scornful person, a very famous figure in the Proverbs. Proverbs 13:1 says of such a fellow, "A wise son hears his father's instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke." To close your ears to the reproof of the Word, to become "self-wise," is a truly fatal attitude because it separates you from the possibility of repentance, turning and returning.

Both our psalm and the Proverbs show a very close interest in the question of means and ends: the logical consequence of a process, the ultimate goals of certain pathways leading to a person's destiny. So we see in our psalm this universal metaphor of the two roads. In American literature, the most famous example, of course, comes from Robert Frost who wrote that two roads diverged in a wood and "I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference." So our psalm here, like Proverbs 2, distinguishes these two paths and these two ends. There is an implicit invitation, and there is a very explicit warning.

In verse 6 we read, "The Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish." If you choose the way of the ungodly, after twenty years, after forty years, after sixty years, your life and your accomplishments and the person that you have become will be like what happens on the tops of the hills in Palestine. That is where the farmers take a flat area, lay down their crop and have their oxen tread over it. Then they winnow it by throwing it up in the air that catches the breeze. Kernels of grain fall back to the threshing floor, but empty husks float away. For the person not connected to Christ, their whole existence eventually blows away like the chaff into the mountains. Jesus pushes this image even further at one point and talks about it being burned (cf. Matt. 13:40). This is the threat that wisdom preaches. According to verse 5, such persons, left to themselves, to their own self-wisdom and their own self-determined life, will fail the upcoming final examination. They will be excluded from the congregation of God's saints, perhaps in this life, but certainly in the life to come. Verse 6 tells us that they will surely perish in withering frustration, separated from the fountain of life, who is God himself. They will perish. The connections between our psalm and the Proverbs are clear.

But consider with me even a little more deeply. In ancient Israel, as you passed into the Old Testament temple, you passed by two awesome pillars:

Jachin and Boaz. Similarly, the Psalter has a double point of entry, a paired introduction in Psalms 1 and 2. These are tied together in a number of ways. You may think it scholarly minutia, but some of the rabbis took Psalms 1 and 2 as a unit. Even the New Testament textual tradition illustrates this. In Acts 13:33, where Psalm 2:7 is quoted, most manuscripts have Paul introducing it as “the second psalm.” But some read “the first psalm” instead. Be that as it may, look at the clear way that these two psalms are bookended together. Psalm 1 begins, “*Ashrē ha’ish.*” And Psalm 2 ends with the same expression, “Blessed”: “Blessed are those who put their trust in him” (Ps. 2:12d). So there is an envelope structure connecting the two poems. They begin and end with blessing, “*Ashrē.*” I’m not suggesting that these are a single psalm, but they are the two sides of a doorway.

Have you seen the two-panelled medieval paintings connected by a hinge in the middle? These are called diptychs—you can see them in some of the early Dutch painters as well. Each diptych is a duplex portrait, and you are called to read each panel in connection with the other. Now, in Psalms 1 and 2 God has given us a diptych, a two-panelled portrait, as the way by which we are instructed to enter into all the riches of the life with God that we see in the Psalter.

How is it that you can have the thrill of knowing that God is yours? How is it that you can know that God is favorable to you? How is it that you can walk through the devastations of this present evil age and have the assurance that God is your protection, that he is for you and that he is watching over you? The only way is to go through this double-panelled door. This is the way in. Psalm 1 tells us that we must go through the way of wisdom, the door of wisdom. Psalm 2 as well tells us that we must go through the portal of wisdom. Verse 10 in Psalm 2 calls to you, “Be wise.”

The entryway of wisdom is like the door of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Perhaps you’ve seen how it’s been walled up at the top. Over the centuries Jerusalem has been conquered so many times, so this church door has been walled up so the cavalry can’t come charging in. In order to get in you have to get off your high horse, and you have to bow down. Our double-panelled entryway to the Psalter calls you to bow down and to give up certain things—to reject worldly ways of thinking. Psalm 1:1 calls you to reject your old, worldly ways of behaving, worldly ways of belonging, worldly ways of valuing—all this is to sit in the scorner’s seat. Wisdom calls you rather to find your orientation in the Lord himself and his revelation. His written communication to you

becomes your point of orientation and your way of determining what is true, what is real, what is right, and what is beautiful—all the big questions. It's the Torah, the instruction of God in its fullness, that guides you and that orients you, not yourself. You now submit to God's instruction rather than choosing your own path. This is the way of wisdom. This is the way of repentance. This is the way of humble turning to God that Psalm 1 calls us to.

But what does this mean? Well, let's think of it in terms of the other side of the diptych. What is the way of being wise, as Psalm 2:10 advises us? It means to "kiss the Son." It means (as Psalm 2 climactically ends), "Blessed are all those who take refuge in *him*." It means to have and to rest on Christ. He is the way into the path of life. The only possibility to receive this full, God-enjoying life that the psalter invites us to is to have the Son, is to have the Lord's Anointed. As Psalm 2:2 puts it, he is literally the Messiah, the Christ—the only authorized representative of God on earth. He is the way to happiness. He is the "must-have." There is no refuge apart from him.

I think that one of the reasons that Psalm 1 is connected so explicitly to this messianic psalm, Psalm 2, is to point us past David and his descendants, the kings of the Jews. It was always the temptation of Old Testament saints and even non-Christian Jews across the centuries to look for this or that particular political leader to be their deliverer. But Psalm 1 sets before us an ideal person, a person who rejects all forms of ungodliness whatsoever. That's the One in whom we must put our hope.

Years ago a gentleman named Henry Flacks had the opportunity to visit Palestine and was asked to address a group of Arabs and Jews. He took as his text this psalm, Psalm 1. He asked the question, "Who is this blessed man of whom the psalmist speaks? He was an absolutely sinless man." And then he went on to ask, "Was he our father Abraham?" And one person listed Abraham's sins: his lying, his false representation regarding his wife, his cowardice. "Was it Moses?" And then another listed his temper, his murder. One after another suggestions were made and rejected. And then an old Jewish man stood up, and he said, "Brothers, I have a little book here. It's called the New Testament. I've been reading it, and if I can believe this book, if I could be sure that it's true, I would say that the man of the first psalm was Jesus of Nazareth." Even David and all his finest descendants failed in the end to make God's revelation their delight. They did not spend their days meditating, soaking, being penetrated by this Word, soliloquizing on it, as it were, meditating and memorizing it. Even David himself and Solomon failed, failed, failed.

There was only one descendant of David who not only *said* that man shall not live on by bread alone, but who actually carried out that life, and who *lived* by that Word that comes from the mouth of God. He was so saturated with Scripture that even in his most unique, his most characteristically individual expressions (as we saw with the Beatitudes) he drips Scripture wherever he goes. The aroma of Scripture is on everything he says and on everything he does. He is this ideal man. He is the only one who fulfils both parts of the diptych. He is, as Psalm 2 puts it so explicitly, the Son. He is the Son begotten of the Father. He is the truly godly Son. He is the man who, although spat upon, although rejected, although looked down on and slandered for 33 years, lived an entire life that was given the divine approval, when God raised him from the dead and vindicated him from all slander. He is the righteous man of Psalm 1 and the Son of Psalm 2.

How is it that you, on that last day, will not have your deeds and your very life blown away as the chaff? How is it that you—you who want a life that is planted like a tree by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season and does not wither—how is it that you will find these things? To express it in the negative, how will you find the way *not to perish* on the last day? You will find your escape only through this righteous man, through being connected with him, our Lord Jesus. Or, to express the same thing positively, you will have this fruitful, meaningful, permanently significant life by being connected to this man.

This imagery that we read in Psalm 1:3 is directly applicable here in Southern California, where our geography is very similar to Palestine. Have you noticed that nothing green grows on the south side of the hills? Why is that? Too much sun. Where do the trees grow? “On the sides of the north.” And on this north side, where do the trees grow? They grow in the valleys because that’s where the dew stays on longer, and that’s where the secret channels of water come in. This green, fruit bearing tree is who you are as a person connected to Christ. It doesn’t mean that you won’t have trouble. It doesn’t mean that you won’t have dry seasons. But it means that there is a permanent fruitfulness and a long term meaning in your life by the grace of God. God will give you a satisfying measure of success in good time, no matter how small your life at the moment may seem.

The last family of the China Inland Mission to exit left the country two years after the communists took over. For those two years they were confined to one small room. Their only furniture was one stool. They made food once

a day. They were there with their small daughter. The only way that they had any kind of fuel was that the father, Art Matthews, collected animal dung from the streets and used that to burn. That's the life they had for two years. But their experience of God's grace and faithfulness and his blessing on them and provision for them (even in that time of privation and suffering) they recorded in a book called *Green Leaf in Drought Time*, obviously taken from our psalm.

So, brothers and sisters, let us then, as those who have escaped these judgments by being connected to Christ, as those who are promised these benefits, this fruitfulness, by being connected to Christ, let us then take up our crosses, and let us follow our Savior even as he leads us through this Psalm 1.

Let me apply some of the warnings that verse 1 demands. We must continue to resist the seductions of the world, which come in various forms. (Some are as close as your computer.) One of the painful (though instructive) experiences of getting older is the grief of watching seminarians crash and burn in various ways. One person is so desperate to get married that when that appealing non-Christian comes along, off they go. Another is frustrated with the imperfections of biblical churches and is drawn in by the boastful claims and the outward attractions of a false church. "I'll give up salvation by grace alone and embrace the Mother from which the Reformers separated for the sake of the gospel." Other seminarians and ministers fall into the sweet seductions of liberalism, which is not that far from any one of our hearts. "Just be looser in your doctrine and give up those distinctives—you'll win the approval of the academy, you'll have a more open way in the world—why be so distinctively Christian?" These are a few of the siren voices Psalm calls us to resist.

Now think about the positive call of verse 2. Let us delight ourselves in the Scriptures. Brothers and sisters, the very fact that you are here at seminary should encourage you. If you have any serious interest in the Scriptures, any fascination, it is because God has worked in you. Romans 8:7 diagnoses the unregenerate heart, "The sinful mind is hostile to God, it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so." The fact that you delight in God's Word shows that his Spirit has already worked in you. But now go on, continue to press on in this Word. Verse 2 was on the short list of Jerome's favorite texts. He translated it as follows "His delight is in the law of the Lord and in his law *he will exercise himself day and night.*" This Jerome did for decade after decade. He became the most influential Bible translator the world has ever known.

This is a strange book. It has a magic-like power in it. The more you hunger and eat of it, the more hunger it gives you. The more you drink of it, the more

thirst it produces in you. Matthew Henry said, “To meditate on God’s Word is to discourse with ourselves regarding the great things contained in it with a close application of mind, a fixedness of thought, till we be suitably affected with those things and experience the savor and power of them in our hearts.”¹² May God give to you and to me, more and more of this rich experience of his Word.

Let us follow Christ not only negatively, by putting aside certain things, not only positively, by glorying in the Word, but most importantly, eschatologically. We are not to look back with regret. We are not to look around us and be consumed by anxiety, which is always there knocking on the door. But we’re to look up and to look forward and to place our hope in the promises that God has made to us, which we have here in this Psalm.

Verse 5 is good news to us because of Christ, as John the Apostle tells us in 1 John 4, where he speaks about our having confidence in the Day of Judgment (v. 17). This may strike us as strange, but it comes from knowing and believing the love that God has for us. By knowing the love of God, we face the Day of Judgment with confidence. We stand in the congregation of the righteous with confidence and joy. It is your greatest privilege in this world to stand in the congregation as a member of God’s people on Sunday and to sing the Lord’s praises. Even to stand in this congregation today is a tremendous privilege. And on that last day we will enjoy fellowship, not just with each other, but with saints across the world, from all nations and across the ages, as we enjoy our God to the end.

In conclusion, let me draw your attention to a touch of gospel sweetness in Psalm 1, verse 6. It says, “The Lord knows the way of the righteous.” This is not some bare knowledge. Our God is not a far-away Zeus who is simply up there and intellectually knows what you are going through. No. We see a similar expression in Nahum 1:7, “The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for (same verb) those who trust in him.” So brothers and sisters, as you go out into this week, as you go out into this semester, keep that eschatological perspective, convinced that the Lord cares for you. He knows your path, and he cares for you and for your way.

Join me in prayer:

¹² Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (1708—1710; repr. New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1935), vol. 3, p. 4.

Our Lord in heaven, we thank you for this outstanding One whom you sent, this ideal Man, who was not touched by any unrighteousness, but walked in accordance with your Law in every way. We thank you that he lived the life that we could not live and suffered the penalty for our sin and disobedience, that he perished and was excluded so that we might be included. Thank you for our substitute and our Savior, the Lord Jesus. We pray, Lord, that you would enable us then to follow in his train, and to reject those sweet seductions that are so often around us, to delight ourselves in your Word even in the busyness of our lives. And give us an eschatological perspective every day, Lord, and every hour and every minute, that we might be looking to you, to your approval, to the smile of your face. Grant us grace and strength, Lord, and enable us to rejoice in you because of your fatherly care and commitment to us—that you care for us because of Christ. We worship you in Jesus' name. Amen.



CHAPTER 8

THE FOUNDATION OF KNOWLEDGE

BRYAN D. ESTELLE | PROVERBS 2:1-11

Professor of Old Testament

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we thank you that we can sing your praises. Indeed, you are good, and your works are good, and your deeds are good. We pray, O Lord, that you would illumine the Scriptures for us this morning. Prepare our hearts. Wipe away all distractions. We plead with you that you would grant us that posture without which no one can understand truth, namely having reverence and humility before your Word. We ask this for Jesus' name's sake. Amen.

As we march through the wisdom texts, this morning we come to Proverbs 2. I will be reading verses 1 through 11. This is God's Word. Please give your careful attention to it:

*My son, if you receive my words
and treasure up my commandments with you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
yes, if you call out for insight
and raise your voice for understanding,
if you seek it like silver
and search for it as for hidden treasures,
then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.
For the LORD gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;
he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
he is a shield to those who walk in integrity,
guarding the paths of justice*

*and watching over the way of his saints.
Then you will understand righteousness and justice
and equity, every good path;
for wisdom will come into your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;
discretion will watch over you,
understanding will guard you.*

You may discern a lot about our culture by looking at bumper stickers. I don't know if you have ever taken the time to observe the bumper stickers, which are little indexes of our culture on the back of cars. I saw one that said something like the following, you've probably seen it too, "Minds are like parachutes, they only work when they are open." I thought to myself, that's so typical of our culture, isn't it: "Minds are like parachutes, they only work when they are open." It reminded me of reading a book entitled, *Dumbing Down: Essays on the Strip-mining of American Culture*. In that book, published by a mainline publisher, Norton & Co., 1996, one article is entitled, "The Postmodern Schoolhouse," where we read the following litany of items that, this author claims, characterizes our postmodern age. He says, firstly, there are many interpretations of reality, according to the mind-set out there. Two: no single perspective on reality can claim exclusive truth. Three: every act of interpretation or judgement reflects the norms of one or more social groups. Number four: the self, our minds, are socially constructed. Five: every judgement or expression reflects the interest, not only of individuals, but more crucially of the social groups or interpretive communities of which we are a part. Six: this is the case, so the thought goes, especially with "high culture," since it allegedly represents the ideas and the symbols that have allowed the dominant race, class, gender, to maintain hegemony, that is, power or control over others. Seven: works reflecting the interest of this dominant class, therefore, must be unmasked, together with their hegemonic biases. Patriarchy, racism, imperialism, must be revealed and exposed. Eight: at the same time, work by and for the oppressed must be retrieved and fully appreciated. And nine, finally: ideals of truth, objectivity, reason, argument, evidence and partiality, etc., are evidence of a so-called "regime of truth," and they are themselves the instruments of oppression, according to this worldview.

So that is the mind-set of much of our unbelieving culture out in the world, the primary components, according to the author, of the postmodern age. This

is the ruling ideology and the set of assumptions about knowledge in the world, and the bottom line for the modernized world is that there is no objective truth.

How striking then when we turn to God's Word, that the bottom line in the Scriptures is exactly the opposite. Whereas the worldview so often in the culture in which we live is that thinking and behaving must be restructured in order to accommodate the absence of God, or perhaps the marginalization or irrelevance of God, the worldview taught in the Bible is just the opposite. For the Christian, according to Proverbs, knowledge must begin and end with a proper knowledge of God himself. And Proverbs teaches us that belief and practice, that is behavior, are inextricably bound up together. The former is the foundation of the latter, and moreover the latter is the very outworking evidence of the former, namely, right belief. Now this morning I am not going to comment on wisdom and the unbeliever's access to knowledge through common grace or natural law. That is something that you can get out of the *Psalms and Wisdom* course; but this morning we have no time to go there. I want us to have a look this morning at three points. First of all, wisdom's conditions, as taught in this passage. And then secondly, wisdom's consequences, as taught in this passage. And finally, wisdom's Christ.

WISDOM'S CONDITIONS

So first of all, wisdom's conditions. We will see this in verses 1 through 4. Let me say a few words first about the structure of chapter 2. Chapter 2 of Proverbs is an astonishing literary composition. It's an exquisite masterpiece. It's essentially one long sentence with lots of semicolons.¹³ There are 22 lines in the chapter, just as there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Now, this is not, strictly speaking, a Hebrew acrostic, which are common in the Psalms and in some of the wisdom literature. Rather, the pattern and organization is somewhat different. The pattern is that you have four lines, followed by four lines, followed by three lines, in the first half of the chapter. Then you have repeated, four lines, followed by four lines, followed by three lines. The first three sections, which take you up through verse 11, are introduced through a signal of the first letter of the alphabet, namely *aleph*. So right after "my son," (*ben'i*), you have a word that begins with an *aleph*. Then verse 5 begins with

¹³ See, for more detail, Patrick W. Skehan, "The Seven Columns of Wisdom's House in Proverbs 1—9," in *Studies in Israelite Poetry and Wisdom* (The Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph series, 1 (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1971, pp. 9—14, especially p. 9.

an aleph, and then verse 9 begins with an *aleph*, the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet, which takes you all the way through verse 11. Then in the second half, you have a very similar pattern of 4-4-3. And the author goes to the middle of the alphabet, and organizes that part of the chapter according to *lamed*.

Now in verses one through four, you have conditions set out, and I want to focus your attention on that. You can see I'm reading the English here, with all the "if" sentences. And basically, there are four conditions set out here in the very beginning of chapter 2. So notice the first condition: "If you accept and store," or as the ESV translates, "If you receive and treasure up." So here the sage's concern that with respect to wisdom, you do not just accept it, but you appropriate it. And you receive it, but you store it up so that you treasure it.

Then you turn in verse 2 to the second condition: "If you turn and apply," or as the ESV says, that you make your ear incline in your heart to these things. Verse 2 further explains verse 1 with a further condition, "making your ear attentive, inclining your heart to understanding." So you can see, once you have stored up and treasured the truth within your heart, according to this sage, then the sage wants you to yield your heart and your obedience to the instruction. And we have here a rather amazing insight into God's desires for his children more universally, or more generally, echoed from Deuteronomy 5:29, "O that their hearts would be inclined to fear me, and that they would obey all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever." So God longs that his children would indeed know and fulfill these conditions that they may know wisdom. You see, God is addressing one of the biggest temptations that all of us face here, namely that we would exalt ourselves over God's Word, as opposed to put ourselves under God's Word and hear its instruction.

But then you turn to verse 3 and you can see a third condition, "that you call out and cry, that you raise your voices," the ESV says. So here we see the language of prayer. Here's something in the third condition expressed further that tells you more about the school of wisdom. In fact, if you fast-forward to verse 6, you can see that wisdom is actually a gift from God. But it's a tenuous gift, as I tell my *Psalms and Wisdom* students. If you think you're wise, you've already lost it, according to Proverbs 26:12, "Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him." We want you to be wiser when you graduate, or by the end of the first semester, and by the end of the *Psalms and Wisdom* course. But we don't want you to know it, because as soon as you know it, you've lost it. But notice that, despite the fact that the

Scriptures teach that wisdom is a gift, it's also something that God commands us to exercise real energy and industry to obtain with all our heart and mind. Under this condition, we are to pray for it.

Then you look at the fourth condition, "look and search," or ESV, "seek and search." This condition really reinforces the previous one. In other words, you are not only to accept and store (verse 1). You're not only to turn and apply your heart to it (verse 2). You're not only to cry out for it, (verse 3). But you are to look for it and search for it. You are to really dig, to go after it, as if there is something valuable here to obtain through sweat and hard work and labor. So those are wisdom's conditions.

WISDOM'S CONSEQUENCES

Now as we look at the structure of the passage, notice the consequences marked out by the Hebrew particle, *'az*. If you're looking at your Hebrew Bible, you'll be able to identify this particle. Even in your English Bible, you can see the "then" clauses in verses 5 to 11. So as these conditions are met, these are wisdom's consequences.

The first consequence is the obtainment of the objective revelation of God, verse 5. The first thing you will experience is the fear of the Lord and the knowledge of God. You see, the fear of the Lord according to Proverbs is that sphere within which wisdom is possible and can be obtainable, and not just objective knowledge, but also ethical behavior. As Professor Horton was explicating the prologue in Proverbs 1, that's essentially what it teaches. It is a gift of God, but paradoxically, it's related to discipline and hard work. And the consequence of such fear of the Lord is the knowledge of God. There is no higher elevating gift than the knowledge of God. Just think of that, the knowledge of God is greatest gift that one may have. And so this wisdom is marked off, not just by its intellectual side, but also by the dynamic side to it, the ethical side, if you will. So verses 1 through 5 set before these lofty conditions and extravagant rewards. But notice, again back to verse 6, wisdom is a gift that God reveals, something that he has and grants to us as we work in earnest for it. So wisdom is a gift to the possessor, but it's not to be had merely by your own efforts, interestingly enough. Although you may think that you've fulfilled these conditions that are expressed earlier on (which you have not!), nevertheless, the Scriptures here teach that wisdom is dispensed alone by God according to his good pleasure. So the Scriptures, you see, tell us that God alone can give you the desire, let alone the reward for the desire, to seek, to dig, to cry

out and long for wisdom. Why? Because wisdom ultimately belongs to God, and to God alone. Job 12:13 says, “To God belong wisdom and power, counsel and understanding are his.” So that’s the first consequence that follows from the four conditions laid out in verses 1 through 4.

Now look at the second consequence in verse 9, namely that you will have ethical knowledge as well as the objective knowledge of God. Verse 9 says, “Then you will understand righteousness, justice, equity and every good path.” So notice, as a Jewish scholar pointed out, rather than *demanding* these virtues, here Proverbs, and especially in the light of the prologue, *promises* these virtues for one who studies the Proverbs and the wisdom literature. So we must not pass too quickly over these words, we could spend a lot of time on them, but nevertheless, what is this righteousness? It is the foundation of right order. To do something *tzedek*, to do something righteous, means to do it in the right way. Justice is the right and just condition. Sometimes it’s translated as “custom.” More often it means the right state of affairs. “Equity” means straightness, levelness. It indicates “the result of honest, fair speech or judgment.”¹⁴ So what do you have here, to review and recap? So far you have four conditions, wisdom’s conditions, in verses 1-4. And then you have two clear consequences in verses 5 and 9.

WISDOM’S CHRIST

However, if you are like me when I look at the details of this passage, or other sections of Proverbs, you sense a problem. I rarely come anywhere close to approximating these conditions. And I surely don’t experience, at least as much as I would care to, the consequences of fulfilling these conditions, namely the fear of the Lord, the knowledge of God, and the ethical behavior that is entailed here.

So where can wisdom be found? Well, in the full context of this passage, which is the canonical context of the entire Bible, the wisdom of Christ is the only way anyone can even begin to meet these conditions and experience these consequences. In other words, there is not one of us present this morning that accepts, stores and applies, calls and cries, looks and searches as we ought. If these are truly the conditions for obtaining wisdom’s consequences, namely true, objective knowledge of God, let alone ethical, right behavior, understanding what is right and just and fair, then we need to ask, where do we turn to find

¹⁴ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1—9*, p. 60.

the fulfillment of wisdom's daunting conditions? We turn to wisdom's Christ.

Jesus Christ was the perfect embodiment of the things spoken of here. And if we poor, sick, frail sinners will only turn to him in repentance and faith, completely relying on him, his sacrificial atonement and his probation-keeping righteousness, which he will give us as we lean in and depend on him, then he will give us wisdom too. He will impart to us the desire to do what is right and wise. And by his grace he will bless us in ever-increasing measure with the consequences of wisdom described here.

Let's look at a few passages briefly that teach that Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of wisdom. Matthew 11 and 12 are absolutely essential to see how the canonical Scriptures demonstrate that the wisdom tradition is taken up by the apostles and applied to Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of it. So, for example, Matthew 11:18-19 says, "John the Baptist came neither eating or drinking, and they say he has a demon. The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by her actions, or her children." (One textual tradition has "her deeds.") Whichever reading is original, the point remains the same: wise deeds or wise children vindicate those who are wise. In other words, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating." The deeds of Christ refer to Christ's work and his mission. Jesus indirectly implies that those who reject his deeds reveal that they are not wise. If you look at the context in Matthew 11, you see that the chapter opens, "When John heard in prison *what Christ was doing*, he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who has come?' Or should we expect someone else?'" (verses 2-3). In other words, it's by one's *deeds* that one can understand that a person, in this case the Lord Jesus Christ, is wise.

Also in Matthew 11 is that profound pericope, perhaps one of the most profound in all the New Testament, so deep it's like those times at the beach when you are wading in shallow surf and your next step plunges you underwater as the ocean floor suddenly drops away into a deep trough. In verses 25 through 30, Jesus says,

I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give

you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly at heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

These verses, amazing as they are, reveal Christ's pre-existence and unique relationship to the Father. Notice verses 25-27, these things are revealed to the simple. It is the Son of God who reveals these things. These things are hidden from those who think themselves wise and learned. Verses 29 and 30 say that Christ's yoke is easy, as opposed to the yoke in the Pharisees' fencing of the Law that was going on at the time, adding extrapolations to the Law. Therefore, we can see from these verses that Christ Jesus considered himself in his relationship to the Father, to be the true wisdom and the revealer of true wisdom. Wisdom is found, according to the Scriptures, in Christ who is wisdom, and in conjunction with the Father and with the Holy Spirit, who gives the power and ability to desire to obey God and indeed obtain wisdom.

We could go on to the next chapter, Matthew 12, a great chapter on typology. There we read in verse 6, "Something greater than the Temple is here." Jesus' priestly mission transcends Israel's worship venue and practices. Then you reach verse 40 and you read, "Something greater than Jonah is here." Jesus' prophetic ministry is superior to the messengers who brought God's Word to Israel (and the nations). Then in verse 41, "Something greater than Solomon is here." So here it seems that the Lord, in his own messianic consciousness, includes the wisdom tradition that Solomon the King represents. His royal wisdom excels Solomon's, even though Solomon was the epitome of wisdom in Israel and the ancient Near East. Prophet, priest and king. Jesus outstrips all the types to reveal himself to be the true antitype, the reality to whom all the shadows and previews had been pointing.

We could go on, but we turn to Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 1:17-3:2, where we see this whole section is one of the most definitive statements about New Testament wisdom as it applies to Christ. What is Paul's major premise here? The Gospel shows the ultimate wisdom of God in Christ's work.¹⁵ A key verse in this section is 1 Corinthians 1:30, "And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, (here Paul quotes Jeremiah) 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" That's true wisdom. Did you notice the

¹⁵ See Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Wisdom* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1987), pp. 174—176.

three qualities that come from possessing Christ as your true wisdom? Christ Jesus has become for us the wisdom of God. This wisdom that we receive in union with Christ is our righteousness, our holiness, our redemption.

Finally, we are turn to Professor Baugh's favorite book, Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. In 1:17 we read the apostle's great prayer for his readers: "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him." This passage shows us that New Testament wisdom is an endowment, bestowed by God's Spirit.¹⁶

Brothers and sisters, the wisdom of Christ is so different from the wisdom of this world! It is a gift. In a time when the world round about you says that you cannot know objective truth, that all truth is subject to power plays and ploys by others, God says, "No, you may know the truth." If you seek for wisdom, if you cry out for her, you may actually learn of the one true God who is "a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth."¹⁷ If you turn to Christ and you beg of him and are completely dependent on him, he will grant you his righteousness, his forgiveness. He will grant you his Spirit in order that you may, in an approximate way, fulfill these conditions and obtain to the objective knowledge of God and right ethical behavior. Seeking him, may you know him. And knowing him, may you live and walk in the life marked by rectitude, justice, and equity. May God accomplish his will in our lives.

Amen.

¹⁶ See, for example, on Paul's view of wisdom, A. Van Roon, "The Relation between Christ and the Wisdom of God according to Paul," *Novum Testamentum* 16.3 (July 1974): 207—239.

¹⁷ Westminster Shorter Catechism, answer 4.



CHAPTER 9

TIME AND CHANCE

ZACHARY R. KEELE | ECCLESIASTES 9:11-10:3

Lecturer in English Bible

For our devotion from the wisdom literature this morning, we will look at the book of Ecclesiastes 9:11 through 10:3. This is God's word:

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.

I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard. The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

*Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench;
so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.*

*A wise man's heart inclines him to the right,
but a fool's heart to the left.*

*Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense,
and he says to everyone that he is a fool.*

Let us pray: *Heavenly Father, again as we come to you to open up your Word, to be students of it, we pray that you would again give us humble hearts and attentive*

minds so that we might learn your truth, that we might learn about your wisdom and the world in which we live under the sun. And Lord, as we grow in the knowledge of your truth, may it continue to root us deeper and deeper into Christ who died and rose from the grave so that we might have the hope of the resurrection, which is our strength and our power to walk by faith here now as your pilgrim people. So bless this word to us. And we ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

You have probably noticed, as the professors have been going through this series on wisdom literature, that there has been a common theme. This theme has been that *wisdom works*. Wisdom works. Wisdom gets the job done. It's the skill and the knowledge that leads to life. And not just any life but the good and godly life. Wisdom steers you clear from those dangers of temptation. It's the compass that navigates you through the treacherous rocks of folly and lands you safely upon the shores of our Lord's favor. And it's for this reason that wisdom is to be so treasured. Like a diamond around your neck, or like an original Rembrandt on your wall, wisdom is to be prized, remembered, cherished. And without a doubt this is true. Wisdom works.

Or, at least according to Qoheleth,¹⁸ this is the “glass half full” side of the story. Yes, Qoheleth, which is the preacher's title in Hebrew, doesn't deny the positive value of wisdom. But he does interrupt the Proverbs' “Hallelujah Chorus” on wisdom to tell us the rest of the story. And few passages in the book are clearer than our text about how wisdom's power is limited. Wisdom works, but it doesn't always work.

Chapter 9, verse 10, sets us up for the opening of our passage. There Qoheleth encourages us to work, because while we are alive we can labor. It says, “with all your strength and with all your might, do whatever your hand finds to do. For in Sheol, in the grave, there will be no goodness of toil.” But as we think about toil as working, wisdom is that primary tool that allows us to work well, to work with success. And so now that he tells us to work and to work with wisdom, he also reminds us this labor is hazardous and success is not guaranteed by wisdom.

He gives us five poetic lines about the unexpected. Note what he says here: “I saw something else under the sun.” He also reached another conclusion through his investigation: “The race is not to the swift. The battle is not to the

¹⁸ Typically translated “Preacher” in Ecclesiastes, *Qoheleth* is the book's Hebrew title. It apparently refers to a leader who presides in a congregation assembled (*qahal*) for worship or instruction.

strong or to the hero, the champion. And those who have wisdom do not always have bread. Riches don't necessarily go to the understanding. And those who are knowledgeable, the educated, don't always have grace or favor or honor." Now, according to Proverbs, these results—the race to the swift, riches to the wise, and so on—are what wisdom makes certain. In fact, Proverbs 3:16 says, "Riches are in wisdom's left hand." But here the wise doesn't even get bread. The fastest person doesn't win the race. The smartest person isn't respected.

Thus Qoheleth reminds us that our wise efforts don't always secure our desired results. The connection between efforts, between wisdom that you put in and the results that you reap is unpredictable. Sometimes our efforts and our planning are for naught. At other times, crazy things happen. Our skills and our planning get washed away in a flash. We know this to be true. Think about the Olympics this past summer. There were favorites, people that everyone expected to get the gold. But for some reason they had a bad day, they were not feeling well and they didn't even medal. Now, Qoheleth tells us the reason at the end of verse 11. Why is the race not to the swift? Why are riches not always to the wise? Because "time and chance happen to them all."

Time and chance happen to everyone. Now by "time" here he is including both God's ordained time, God's sovereignty, and also the right time for success. As you know, timing is crucial to success. You may have a great joke but if your timing is off, it belly-flops without a laugh. It's not just having the right words; you have to get the timing. But sometimes we miss the timing. And finally he says "chance." Here "chance" refers to accidents, tragedies, slip ups, unexpected misfortunes of any type that we cannot anticipate or control. And we know these happen to us all. Even Usain Bolt trips over his shoelaces sometimes. We know that the oddest things can happen to us. Red lights, sicknesses, spills, computer crashes come out of the blue, unexpected, unplanned. These happen to us all.

And because they happen, they foil wisdom. Wisdom can plan. Wisdom can have everything in order. But one little mess up, one unexpected accident, and it's all for naught. Note how Qoheleth pictures time and chance. How do they happen? Well, one reason, he says, that "time and chance happen" is that "man doesn't know the time." Here "time" probably refers to the future or to the "best time" in which you need to do something. How often have you had a job and you know what to do, but you are wrestling with the question, "When should I do it? When is the optimum time when I should talk to this person?" And so often we can get it wrong. We say the right thing, but at the wrong time.

We don't know the future. Wisdom can't see the future. In fact, throughout the whole book of Qoheleth, the Preacher is always reminding us that time is in God's hands, not in ours. He is sovereign over time. We do not know the future. So why does time and chance happen? Because we don't know the time. We are limited creatures.

But note how time and chance happen to us. He compares our experience to birds and fish that are taken in a snare or a net. Fish are just swimming along having a normal day, and all of a sudden wham! They're in a net. The bird doesn't see the snare. He is enjoying the view. Whack! He is caught. So often snares—time and chance—happen to us. Maybe it's happened to you or a friend; you're driving down the road, minding your own business, obeying all the laws. Suddenly, out of your left side where you don't see it, someone runs a red light and hits you. Not your fault, misfortune, tragedy; all sorts of things happen. Thus you can have everything planned: your papers, your finals. Or you're all ready for your sermon on Sunday morning, and coffee spills on your shirt. You lose your car keys, so you're late to the final exam. You get fired out of the blue. Your house can burn down. Computers glitch. The car won't start. The power goes out. Time and chance happens to us all. This is part of the common curse of this world that we live in.

Thus it's proper that the Preacher calls these evils "chance." For even though we know that God is in control of all things and we believe in his providence for sure, yet these accidents can happen with little rhyme or reason, as far we are concerned. We don't see them coming. Even after the fact, we don't even understand why they happened. We could see maybe a good that came from them, but we don't understand why they happened. They are like a trap. We are floating along life and wham! They suddenly hit us and all of wisdom's planning and work comes to naught. Our efforts can become zero. Yes, we are limited creatures, and this is the limit of our wisdom. Wisdom is good. It works. But not always. Because time and chance can foil it. Accidents can wipe it away.

So Qoheleth continues to illustrate this with a parable. Now this is a realistic parable, something he might have seen. But we shouldn't think of it as necessarily historical, but it rings true to experience in this world. So he tells us "the story of Smallville," you could call it. It is about a little village with just a handful of people in it. Now note the contrast in this scenario: You have a small village with a few people and a poor wise man. But up against it is a great king with mighty siegeworks with which he surrounds the town. This is like a pro-football team going up against the high school football team. The foregone

conclusion is obvious: the mighty king is going to win. He has the power. He has the strength. He has the might.

And then note the odd fact that the poor man is wise. According to the optimistic view of wisdom, if you are wise, then you shouldn't be a peasant, you shouldn't be poor. You should be successful. So the great king surrounds the tiny, vulnerable village, and this wise peasant is in the middle. Then the unexpected happens. With his wisdom the peasant somehow offered strategic counsel that saved the city. You don't know how he did it. The Preacher doesn't tell us. But his wisdom performed the unimaginable. Somehow this poor, wise peasant overcame the mighty opponent, like David conquering Goliath. The power of wisdom is remarkable. This is the power of the underdog, the wisdom that can overcome.

Yet note that Qoheleth makes two points from this parable. First, wisdom is powerful. It saved the city. So verse 18 says that "wisdom is better than the weapons of war" and verse 16 that "wisdom is better than might." Wisdom is better than lifting a lot of weight. Wisdom can be better than the biggest arsenal of nuclear weapons. Wisdom is powerful. The poor peasant saved the un-savable through wisdom.

But what's the other lesson? That wisdom can be undone, forgotten, wiped out by just a little bit of folly. Verse 18 also says that "one sinner can destroy much good." Here we should understand "sinner" not so much as a moral term, but rather in the sense of "fool, moron, careless person." He means someone who makes a lot of careless mistakes. For what happened? The wise peasant saved the city, but then he was forgotten. His wisdom was despised. It wasn't honored. It wasn't remembered. There was no memorial or statue to the poor wise man. Instead, his great act of wisdom was forgotten and dishonored.

So Proverbs 10:1 comments, "one fly spoils the whole batch of perfume." Perfumers were excellent at mixing 1,000 ingredients to come up with the perfect scent. It was the epitome of skill and wisdom. But it only takes one pesky fly to land in all that effort and turn it rancid. Just a little bit of folly, just a little bit of stupidity, and what had been wise is only fit to be flushed down the drain. Thus it's true that wisdom has power. But wisdom is not a guarantee of success. Its record is not 100 percent. It's not undefeated. For just a little bit of folly can undo it.

Thus time and chance happen to us all, and just a little bit of folly can destroy all our wisdom and planning. This is the Preacher's point. This is "the rest of the story." Wisdom works, but it doesn't always work. Folly and evil

chance so often happen to us in our life under the sun. And for some of these accidents, we don't know the cause. At other times, unforeseen misfortunes can be seen to result from someone's folly. Maybe even our own. Indeed, our own folly too often cancels our wisdom. You can plan wisely for months, have everything in order, and then one night you do one stupid thing, and it's all gone away. This is the common curse of life under the sun. It has chaotic elements, unexpected evils that limit wisdom and its power. Thus Qoheleth gives us a realistic picture. Wisdom works but not always. And why? Because of folly and time and chance. Because of the cursed world in which we live. It's our life. And we need to be realistic and follow it. Wisdom is the rule that we follow, but we can't be ignorant of the many and regular exceptions to it. Time and chance spring on us all. Just a smidge of folly can destroy wisdom and our wise preparations.

Of course, this shouldn't lead us to despair. Why? Because Christ entered the same world that we inhabit. He lived under the same sun that we do. He endured time and chance. He was surrounded by folly. Think of how often he argued with the Pharisees, or even his own disciples. He suffered in the world that we live in. He was humbled even unto death. Thus Christ doesn't change our everyday lives. Being a Christian, having faith, doesn't free us from time and chance. It doesn't save us from all folly. We live in many ways just like all other people, susceptible to time and chance.

But Christ did merit for us a better life, a better realm in his resurrection. Indeed, we groan under the sun, as with creation. But the futility, the time and the chance and the folly, these are all part of our calling to live by faith. But the power of that faith is the resurrection that Christ earned for us. That this world, this time and chance, is not all there is. But there is the resurrected life, which Christ bestows as a free gift. This is our strength as we journey on, under time and chance. Our wisdom doesn't guarantee success. But Christ's wisdom unto death earned for us everlasting life, in that new world where death will be no more and time and chance will be extinct. We will be free from the chaotic elements, to live in the joy of God's face. This is our strength, the resurrection. This is our grace as we journey on in faith using our wisdom but knowing that often it will be foiled. Amen.



CHAPTER 10

WISDOM AND THE WORD

W. ROBERT GODFREY | DEUTERONOMY 4:1-10

President Emeritus & Professor of Church History Emeritus

Father, we do pray that we might learn wisdom's ways, that we might look to your truth, that we might rejoice in your Word, and that we might put our trust in Christ our Savior. So bless us in this time of devotion, for we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

We have been looking together at wisdom literature in our morning devotions this semester. While the wisdom literature reminds us that we have to cultivate a spirit of wisdom for many of the decisions of life to which the Word of God does not speak directly, the Word of God also reminds us that the foundation of all wisdom and godly living is the Word of God and the Law of God. That is what Deuteronomy 4 teaches us. So let give attention to the reading of God's Word, the first ten verses of Deuteronomy 4:

And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you. Your eyes have seen what the LORD did at Baal-peor, for the LORD your God destroyed from among you all the men who followed the Baal of Peor. But you who held fast to the LORD your God are all alive today. See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD

our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children's children—how on the day that you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, the LORD said to me, "Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so."

I've been teaching Deuteronomy in my Sunday school class at church. I decided to undertake that, in part, because I think many Christians are not very well acquainted with the book of Deuteronomy. Also, as I was studying the New Testament, I realized that Deuteronomy is probably the third most quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament, after Psalms and Isaiah. If Jesus and the apostles thought it was useful to know Deuteronomy, it seemed to me that maybe it would actually be useful for us too.

I think the problem with Deuteronomy is that often it seems to be a sort of collection of laws, and some of them obscure laws, such as those at the end of chapter 4 about the cities of refuge in the Promised Land. We may wonder from time to time what, exactly, is the usefulness of knowing about cities of refuge in our time. I won't take time to try to talk about that today. But I want only to focus today on the way in which the Word of God is talked about as wisdom for the people of God. For surely this is a theme that remains useful and important for us today.

The Word is wisdom for the people of God. Whatever parts of life need our reflection as wise people to make decisions beyond what the Word of God tells us explicitly, Deuteronomy is making the point that the Word of God is the explicit foundation of all of our living wisely and in an understanding way, particularly before God. There may be many decisions of life on the horizontal level that we are not given explicit answers to. But when it comes to how we are to live before God, how we are to serve God, how we are to worship God, how we are to live for him, the Word of God is explicit, and teaches us how to be wise. And that is the point that is being made here, it seems to me, in Deuteronomy 4.

We are called to recognize that the Word is wisdom, first of all, because it comes from the Lord. That is an obvious point, but one that I think the church

in every generation has to be renewed in, because in almost every generation, certainly in the modern church era, there are voices that arise that say, “Well, no, the Bible really isn’t the Word of God. It may contain the Word of God, it may have parts of the Word of God, it has connection with the Word of God, but it isn’t the Word of God.” But the teaching of the Word of God itself is that the Bible is the Word of God. And we can have confidence in it, we can have certainty in its truth, because it comes from God. It is interesting that our Reformed forebears were insistent that the truthfulness of the Word of God comes from the fact that it comes from God, who is truth. It must necessarily follow that the God who is truth will make a truthful revelation to his people. And that needs to be our confidence. That’s why we are here studying. That’s why you have given a semester of your lives to studying the Word of God. We need to be strengthened, built up, renewed in that confidence that the Bible is the Word of God, and therefore is our wisdom, is our understanding in all things that relate to our relationship to God and our life before him. The Word comes from God.

It’s also interesting here, and I think that it’s one of the important points of Deuteronomy as a whole, that the Word of God comes to the people of God through the ministers of God. And so the early part of Deuteronomy is very much talking about how the Word comes through Moses. That’s the point made here in Deuteronomy 4. Later, toward the end of Deuteronomy, the point will be made that Moses is dying and the leadership is being passed on to Joshua. Also at the very heart of Deuteronomy are laws relative to leadership that will be ongoing in the life of Israel. There will be a king, there will be prophets, there will be priests, who will institutionally ensure—or at least their calling is institutionally to ensure—that the Word of God remains among the people. And for you who are here studying who hope to be leaders in the church, as ministers, as teachers in a variety of ways, serving the church, that should be an encouragement as well. The Lord’s intention always was that there would be structures in the church that would preserve the Word of God, that would teach the Word of God, that would minister the Word of God to the people. And here as we complete a semester of study, it is important to remember that. The Word is from the Lord, the Word is through his appointed ministers and leaders in the church.

That Word is one of the ways in which God is near us. You notice that interesting statement in verse 7, “For what great nation is there that has a God so near to it as the LORD our God is to us whenever we call upon him.” That

text, of course, makes particularly clear that the Lord is near to his people when we pray, which is a great encouragement to prayer, a great assurance to prayer. But in this context, it also is implicitly saying, the Lord our God is near to us because we have his Word. He has given us his revelation. He has given us his truth. And it is because we have that truth and because we live in that truth that we can have assurance that he hears us. That seems to be the point made in Psalm 145:18-19, “The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfils the desire of those who fear him. He also hears their cry and saves them.” The Lord is near to his people as a people who have embraced his Word, who have embraced the covenant relationship with him that he has established. That’s why it is so important that we continue to know that the Word is from the Lord, because he is the one who has given it and has drawn near to us in that Word.

Here we are also told that the Word is wisdom for the life of his people. It directs our living. It’s almost overwhelming how often in the early chapters of Deuteronomy that the point is made, over and over again: “Take care to listen. Take care to know. Take care to obey. Take care to trust. Take care to follow. Take care, take care, take care.” This is the great theme of Moses in this last great sermon of his, perhaps so that the people would be provoked. We might almost be tempted at points in reading the early chapters of Deuteronomy to say, “You’ve said that already, get on with it!” Sometimes we’ve heard preachers who make us feel that way. “We know that already!” But of course the point that Moses is making is that the people don’t know that, they don’t learn that, they won’t listen to that. But it is very much a theme taken up in the New Testament as well, isn’t it? Ephesians 5:15 says, “Take care how you walk, look carefully how you walk.” This is a continuing appeal of the Lord to his people. Being a child of God is to listen to the voice of the Father, and to follow what the Father has to say, not only in external action, but also, here it says, in the heart. Action is to flow from the heart. We are to hide the Word of God in our hearts so that we might not sin against him. That’s one of the great principles of living before the Lord.

It’s interesting that here as in so many places in Deuteronomy, the focal point of living for the Lord is avoiding idolatry. What is the historical event brought to memory in these verses of our text? It is the sin of Israel at Baal Peor, when the people of Israel became idolaters and deserted the Lord their God to worship Baal. Over and over again, the appeal is made to the people of God: be faithful to the Lord your God. Don’t let your hearts wander from him. Rest in

him, trust in him, serve him, worship him.

Sometimes as Reformed people, we think there are certain chapters of the Bible that are uniquely ours. Ephesians 2, for example, is a good Reformed chapter. (Of course, Professor Baugh would want to say that Ephesians 1 through 6 are Reformed chapters!) Or maybe we say, “Romans 9 is a Reformed chapter.” We appeal to it when we confront Arminians and we say, “What are you going to do with that one?” Well, Deuteronomy 4 should be on our short list of “Reformed chapters.” It talks so much about the centrality of the Word of God and particularly about the centrality of the Word of God for the worship of God. After all, Deuteronomy 4 is quoted, isn’t it, in Hebrews, “Our God is a consuming fire, so worship him with reverence and with awe” (Heb. 12:28-29). Here is the focal concern that the Word should be our wisdom in living for God, particularly in terms of our worship and our service to him. Now, we know that adhering to God’s Word in our worship is not easy, and there are certain hermeneutical discussions as to exactly what the difficulty of keeping this law amounts to. But surely what it teaches us is that we are a sinful people in need of a Savior. That doesn’t eliminate the call to study the Word, to know the Word, to follow the Word, to treasure the Word; but it does always at the same time point us to a Savior who has fulfilled the Word perfectly for us and who strengthens us in that service of the Word. We recognize, don’t we, that that’s not easy to do. Even with the strength of the Holy Spirit of Christ, even as a people regenerated, even as a people made right with God by the work of Christ on the cross, we still struggle, don’t we? We live in a world of opposition to Christ and to his truth.

And so it has always been. I was reading Calvin’s sermons on Deuteronomy. That’s a big job, because it’s a big book with sixteenth-century English and little print that older eyes are having more and more trouble following. But in his twentieth sermon on Deuteronomy (he’s only reached chapter 4 in his twentieth sermon) towards the end, Calvin seems to look up from the pulpit and look through the door in the back of the church and he says,

Nevertheless I will now conclude with a complaint. I see walkers yonder, and I know for what their coming is, namely to show a contempt for God and his Word, which is an intolerable lewdness. They come babbling here to the door, and that not twice or thrice, but more than a dozen times. It shows well that they despise God manifestly. Such is the honor of Geneva that when the gospel is a-preaching, men come even to the church door to

make a flat mockery of it.¹⁹

Now I read that to encourage you. If Calvin had hecklers, it's Calvinist comfort, you know, to say, "Cheer up, things could be worse." Calvin had hecklers when he preached, and he preached early in the morning. These are weekday morning sermons. He preached early in the morning. For people to come to mock him, to heckle, they had to be really determined about it. It reminds us that the preaching of the Word never proceeds easily, never proceeds automatically. We have to be prepared for the mockery of the world; we have to be prepared for those who don't want to hear the Word of God, who resent the fact that the Word of God is taught.

Further, this teaching of Moses reminds us that the Word of God not only comes from the Lord and is our life, but it's also a light to the world. Striking here, isn't it, in Deuteronomy 4. It's not just for Israel that the Word is given, but it is so that Israel, by embracing the Word and living out the Word, will be a testimony. One might almost say that they will be a light to the world. By their embracing the Word of God, one commentator on Deuteronomy even said, "It is not the laws that demonstrate Israel's wisdom but their obedience to the laws."²⁰ The wisdom talked about here is not only the wisdom of the Word given, but it's also the wisdom of the Word accepted and followed. Israel is wise, not just in having the Word, but in following the Word.

That's a call to us, too, to not only say that statutes of the Lord are righteous, but also to commit ourselves in the strength of the Holy Spirit to seek to follow that Word and to live in a way that we will indeed be the light of the world. And so I hope we can all be committed, confident that our labors here are not in vain, as we seek to understand the Word and embrace it. We have particularly good attendance for the last morning devotions of the semester. That must mean that you are all desperate and in need of prayer. Be encouraged that the Word of God is from the Lord and for our life and is a light to the world as we serve him. Let us pray together:

Lord, we are thankful for your Word. Help us never to take it for granted. Help us never to become indifferent to the extraordinary privilege that is ours, that you have drawn near to us through your Word. And we know that, even more, you have

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy* (1583; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 121.

²⁰ Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1—11 (Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 6A)* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), p. 80.

drawn near to us in that eternal Word who took on flesh to be our Savior. We thank you for him. We thank you that he covers all of our sins with his blood, and we thank you that he gives us his Holy Spirit, that we might have ears that are open and hearts that are receptive to your Word. We pray that more and more, in the power of the Spirit, we might be a people who are in our living a light of the world. Hear us and bless us, for we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

THE TREASURY
OF GOD'S WISDOM



CONTRIBUTORS



DENNIS E. JOHNSON

PROFESSOR OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

B.A., Westmont College

M.Div. and Th.M., Westminster Theological Seminary

Ph.D., Fuller Theological Seminary

Dr. Johnson has taught at Westminster Seminary California since 1982. He previously pastored Orthodox Presbyterian churches in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, and East Los Angeles, California. After teaching New Testament for 16 years, he now teaches primarily preaching and ministry courses, in which he applies his background in biblical studies to the issues of ministry, the church, and the culture. Dr. Johnson is Associate Pastor of New Life Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Escondido. He has served as moderator of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church General Assembly and Presbytery of Southern California, moderator of the South Coast Presbytery in the Presbyterian Church in America, member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church Committee on Christian Education, and Trustee of Covenant College. Dr. Johnson preached and taught in various countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America.

He is the author of *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures*, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption*, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation*, *Let's Study Acts*, *Philippians* (Reformed Expository Commentary), and *Walking with Jesus through His Word: Discovering Christ in All the Scriptures*. He is also coauthor of *Counsel from the Cross* and editor of and contributor to *Heralds of the King: Christ-centered Sermons in the Tradition of Edmund P. Clowney*. He has contributed essays to *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*; *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine*; *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry*; *Resurrection and Eschatology*; and *Speaking the Truth in Love*. He is a contributor to the *Reformation Study Bible* and the *English Standard Version Study Bible*.

Dr. Johnson and his wife, Jane, have four married children and many grandchildren.



S. M. BAUGH

PROFESSOR OF NEW TESTAMENT

*B.A. and B.A., University of Oregon
M.A.R. and M.Div., Westminster Seminary California
Ph.D., University of California, Irvine*

Dr. Baugh has taught Greek at Westminster Seminary California since 1983 and New Testament and Greek since 1991. He is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Dr. Baugh wrote the two main textbooks used for Greek I–III: *New Testament Greek for Interpreters* (third edition) and *A First John Reader*. His other recent books are a commentary on Ephesians in the Evangelical Exegetical Commentary series and *The Majesty on High: Introduction to the Kingdom of God in the New Testament*. His other writings include commentary on the Pastoral Epistles and Philemon in the award-winning *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, study notes on Ephesians in *The ESV Study Bible*, and many scholarly articles for academic journals and book collections of essays. Dr. Baugh and his wife, Kathy, have two grown daughters and a son and live in Valley Center on “The Lazy B Ranch.”



J. V. FESKO

ACADEMIC DEAN & PROFESSOR OF SYSTEMATIC
THEOLOGY & HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

B.A., Georgia State University

M.A. Th., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Ph.D., King's College, University of Aberdeen, Scotland

Dr. Fesko has taught at Westminster Seminary California since 2009. He is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He served in church planting and pastoral ministry for more than ten years. His research interests include the integration of biblical and systematic theology, soteriology, and early modern Reformed theology. Dr. Fesko's most recent publications include, *Death in Adam, Life in Christ, Spirit of the Age, The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption, The Covenant of Redemption, The Theology of the Westminster Standards, Songs of a Suffering King, and Beyond Calvin: Union with Christ and Justification in Early Modern Reformed Theology*. His scholarly essays have appeared in various books and journals including *Perichoresis, Reformed Theological Review, Journal of Reformed Theology, Church History and Religious Culture, Calvin Theological Journal, Trinity Journal, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, and the *Westminster Theological Journal*.

Dr. Fesko and his wife, Anneke, have three children and reside in Escondido.



MICHAEL S. HORTON

J. GRESHAM MACHEN PROFESSOR OF
SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY & APOLOGETICS

B.A., Biola University

M.A., Westminster Seminary California

Ph.D., University of Coventry and Wycliffe Hall, Oxford

Dr. Horton has taught apologetics and theology at Westminster Seminary California since 1998. In addition to his work at the Seminary, he is the president of White Horse Inn, for which he co-hosts the White Horse Inn, a nationally syndicated, weekly radio talk-show exploring issues of Reformation theology in American Christianity. He is also the editor-in-chief of *Modern Reformation* magazine. Before coming to WSC, Dr. Horton completed a research fellowship at Yale University Divinity School from 1996 to 1998. In 2016, he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity from Grove City College. A member of various societies, including the American Academy of Religion and the Evangelical Theological Society, Dr. Horton is the author/editor of more than twenty-five books, including a series of studies in Reformed dogmatics published by Westminster John Knox.

His most recent books are *Rediscovering the Holy Spirit: God's Perfecting Presence in Creation, Redemption, and Everyday Life*, *Core Christianity: Finding Yourself in God's Story*; *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World*, *Calvin on the Christian Life: Glorifying and Enjoying God Forever*, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples*, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* and *The Gospel Commission*. He has written articles for *Modern Reformation*, *Pro Ecclesia*, *Christianity Today*, *The International Journal of Systematic Theology*, *Touchstone*, and *Books and Culture*.

Dr. Horton is an ordained minister in the United Reformed Churches in North America and lives in Escondido with his wife, Lisa, and four children.



JOSHUA J. VAN EE

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF HEBREW &
OLD TESTAMENT

B.A., Geneva College

M.Div., Westminster Seminary California;

M.A. and Ph.D., University of California at San Diego

Dr. Van Ee has taught language and biblical studies courses at Westminster Seminary California since 2002. He is an ordained minister in the United Reformed Churches in North America and enjoys various opportunities to preach and teach. He is the son of a pastor in the Christian Reformed Church.

His graduate work included studies comparing Old Testament covenants with ancient treaties and legal texts. In his dissertation, he analyzed creation accounts from the biblical world and explored their relationship with future images of blessing in the prophets. He has studied in Israel and done archaeological work in Jordan. He is an active member of the Society of Biblical Literature. His current research is focused on the ceremonial and sacrificial system. He enjoys training students in the biblical languages and literatures so they can rightly understand and expound the Scriptures. He has published popular and scholarly articles on the Old Testament.

Dr. Van Ee, his wife, Heidi, and their three children reside in Escondido.



JOEL E. KIM

PRESIDENT & ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF
NEW TESTAMENT

B.A., University of California, Los Angeles
M.Div., Westminster Seminary California
Th.M., Calvin Theological Seminary

Rev. Kim has taught New Testament at Westminster Seminary California since 2005 and in May 2017 was appointed as the fourth president of WSC (beginning August 1, 2017). He previously taught at Calvin Theological Seminary and International Theological Seminary in Los Angeles, as well as in Taiwan and Indonesia.

Rev. Kim is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America and has served as a pastor in several churches in Michigan and Southern California since his graduation from WSC in 1997. As the son of a Christian Reformed Church minister, he was catechized with the Three Forms of Unity from childhood. Born in South Korea, his family moved to Southern California when he was nine years of age, where he would learn English and retain his fluency in speaking the Korean language. He has served the global church through agencies like Southeast Asia Partnership, and, among other notable leadership services, he chairs the Candidates and Credentials Committee of the Korean Southwest Presbytery of the PCA.

Among his publications, he co-edited *Always Reformed: Essays in Honor of W. Robert Godfrey* (2010). His Ph.D. studies in Historical Theology were with the noted scholar Professor Richard A. Muller at Calvin Theological Seminary.

Rev. Kim and his wife, Sharon, have a daughter and a son and reside in Escondido, where his family attends New Life Presbyterian Church.



R. SCOTT CLARK

PROFESSOR OF CHURCH HISTORY & HISTORICAL
THEOLOGY

B.A., University of Nebraska

M.Div., Westminster Seminary California

D.Phil., Oxford University

Dr. Clark has taught at Westminster Seminary California since 1997, during which time he also served as Academic Dean (1997–2000), and has also taught at Wheaton College, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, and Concordia University, Irvine. He has been a minister in the Reformed Church in the United States and is presently a minister in the United Reformed Churches in North America. He has served congregations in Missouri and California.

Among his publications are *Always Reformed: Essays in Honor of W. Robert Godfrey* (co-editor and contributor); *Recovering the Reformed Confession*; *Caspar Olevian and the Substance of the Covenant*; *Covenant, Baptism, and Election*; *Classic Reformed Theology* (series editor), *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry* (editor and contributor); *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (co-editor and contributor); *Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy* (contributor); *A Companion to Paul in the Reformation* (contributor); *Sober, Strict, and Scriptural* (contributor); *Reforming or Conforming?* (contributor); *The Faith Once Delivered* (contributor); *Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes* (contributor); *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine* (contributor); *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century* (contributor); *The New Dictionary of Theology* (contributor); *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (contributor); *The New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics* (contributor); and *The Compromised Church* (contributor). He has also written for *The Westminster Theological Journal*, *The Concordia Theological Quarterly*, *The Confessional Presbyterian*, and for a variety of popular magazines and websites.

Dr. Clark and his wife, Barbara, have two children and reside in Escondido.



CHARLES K. TELFER

PROFESSOR OF BIBLICAL LANGUAGES

B.A., University of Illinois

M.Div., Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

Ph.D., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Dr. Telfer is a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America and serves on the session of Resurrection Presbyterian, a church-plant in downtown San Diego. Prior to joining the faculty of WSC in 2011, he served as pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church (OPC) in the Chicago area for nine years and as Adjunct Professor of Greek at Mid-America Reformed Seminary for seven years. He has served as a pastor in North Carolina and as a missionary in a part of Northeast Africa where he learned Tigrinya (a sister language to Hebrew). He has studied in Jerusalem and done archeological work in Israel. He has often served as an interpreter and has had the opportunity to minister in a variety of international contexts including Colombia, Cuba, Guatemala, Mexico, Spain, and Sudan.

His translation projects have included serving as editor for a committee to re-translate the Westminster Shorter Catechism into Tigrinya. His dissertation was published by Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht as *Wrestling with Isaiah: the Exegetical Methodology of Campegius Vitringa* (1659-1722). He has contributed other essays on Vitringa (a notable Dutch OT scholar) to *Biblical Theology: a Discipline with a History* (Wipf and Stock) and *Handbuch der Bibelhermeneutiken* (De Gruyter). Other of his translations, articles and reviews have appeared in *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, *New Horizons*, and *Themelios*. He is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society, the Society of Biblical Literature, the National Association of Professors of Hebrew, and the Evangelical Missiological Society.

Dr. Telfer and his wife, Rhonda, have four grown children (two of whom are married). Originally from Illinois, they enjoy the active lifestyle of Southern California.



BRYAN D. ESTELLE

PROFESSOR OF OLD TESTAMENT

B.A., University of Oregon

M.Div., Westminster Seminary California

M.A. and Ph.D., The Catholic University of America.

Dr. Estelle has taught at Westminster Seminary California since 2000. He is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Prior to taking his position at WSC, he was a pastor in an Orthodox Presbyterian congregation in Maryland

and was involved in planting a church in Oregon for the Presbyterian Church in America. He lectured in Hebrew at The Catholic University between 1997 and 2000. He is a member of the Society of Biblical Literature, the Catholic Biblical Association, the National Association of the Professors of Hebrew, and a Fellow of the Institute of Biblical Religion. Dr. Estelle is the author of *Salvation through Judgment and Mercy: The Gospel According to Jonah*, and *Echoes of Exodus: Tracing a Biblical Motif*. He has contributed essays to *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California*; *The Law Is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant* (contributor and co-editor); and *But Let A Man Examine Himself: Children and the Lord's Supper*. He has also contributed articles and reviews to *The Biblical Historian*, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, *The Confessional Presbyterian*, *Hebrew Studies*, *Maarav*, *Modern Reformation*, *New Horizons*, *Ordained Servant*, *Westminster Theological Journal*, and *Themelios*. He was a contributor to and an Old Testament editor of the *Reformation Study Bible*. He is also a contributor to the forthcoming *Baker Dictionary of Biblical Words*.

Dr. Estelle and his wife, Lisa, have two sons and one daughter. He and his family enjoy outdoor pursuits.



ZACHARY R. KEELE

LECTURER IN ENGLISH BIBLE

B.A., Geneva College

M.Div., Westminster Seminary California

Rev. Keele has lectured at Westminster Seminary California in English Bible Survey since 2004, as well as teaching Greek and Hebrew classes sporadically. He is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, serving as pastor of Escondido Orthodox Presbyterian Church since 2004. Rev.

Keele is the co-author of *Sacred Bond: Covenant Theology Explored* and has contributed numerous articles of *Modern Reformation* and *New Horizons*.

Rev. Keele and his wife, Tovauh, have two sons and one daughter, and they reside in Escondido.



W. ROBERT GODFREY

PRESIDENT EMERITUS & PROFESSOR OF
CHURCH HISTORY EMERITUS

A.B., Stanford University

M.Div., Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

M.A. and Ph.D., Stanford University

Dr. Godfrey has taught church history at Westminster Seminary California since 1981 and served as the seminary's third president from 1993 to 2017. He previously taught at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Stanford University, and Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He is a minister in the United Reformed Churches in North America, a Ligonier Ministries Teaching Fellow, and has spoken at many conferences including those sponsored by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology, and Ligonier Ministries.

He is the author of *Learning to Love the Psalms, An Unexpected Journey, Reformation Sketches, Pleasing God in Our Worship, God's Pattern for Creation* and *John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor*. He is co-author of *Westminster Seminary California: A New Old School* and has written chapters or articles in *John Calvin, His Influence in the Western World; Through Christ's Word; Theonomy: A Reformed Critique; The Agony of Deceit; Roman Catholicism; Sola Scriptura; The Practice of Confessional Subscription; The Coming Evangelical Crisis*; and in such journals as *Archive for Reformation History, Sixteenth-Century Journal, and Westminster Theological Journal*. In 2010, a festschrift was published in Dr. Godfrey's honor entitled *Always Reformed*.

Dr. Godfrey and his wife, Mary Ellen, have three grown children, including two sons who are ministers in the United Reformed Churches in North America.

AN INTRODUCTION TO

WESTMINSTER SEMINARY CALIFORNIA



CONFESSIONAL



PERSONAL



RIGOROUS

Westminster Seminary California (WSC) is a Christian institution seeking to glorify God through graduate theological study. Its primary responsibility is to educate future pastors for Christian churches, especially for Presbyterian and Reformed denominations. It also provides theological education for others who will serve in the Christian community and the larger society.

WSC offers instruction in biblical, theological, and ministerial disciplines to both men and women as the heart of a program to help students to develop intellectually and spiritually as leaders. While the focus of our programs is to educate and prepare men for office-bearing ordained ministries of instruction and leadership as pastors, WSC also furnishes training in Scripture and theology to both women and men who are preparing to serve Christ and His church in vocations other than the ordained leadership ministries so that the whole body of Christ may be enriched through the diverse gifts bestowed by God's Spirit.

Because zeal without knowledge or knowledge without zeal can only injure the church, WSC seeks to develop in its students a balanced combination of scholarship and Christ-like piety, where proper cultivation of the mind increases the devotion of the heart. Westminster Seminary California seeks to establish a pastoral and scholarly community that ultimately seeks to *glorify Christ, promote his Gospel, and serve his Church.*

FOR CHRIST

We are “for Christ” because he was first “for us” (Rom 5:8). With God's Word and the Reformed confessions we say that Jesus Christ is God the Son incarnate, true God and true man (Matt 27:54; Rom 9:5; 1 Tim 2:5), and God's saving and justifying Word to all who believe (John 1:1, 18; 3:16). Christ is the “righteousness of God” (Rom 3:21). This seminary exists “for Christ,” because “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12) and because Christ is the focal point of God's revelation and saving work in the world (Luke 24:25–28; 2 Cor 1:20).

FOR HIS GOSPEL

Gospel means “Good News.” The Good News is that although in the first Adam humanity willfully chose death and hell over life and glory, in the second Adam (Rom 5:12–21) God has not left us in sin and death. Where we were disobedient, Christ was obedient for us; the death we deserved, he suffered for us; the life we need, he achieved in his resurrection; and ever more he reigns at God’s right and will hand to come in glory (Rom 4:25; Titus 2:13). The Good News is also that sinners are saved by God’s grace alone, through trusting in Christ the Savior alone, and not by our doing or even by our sanctity (Gal 2:16). Westminster Seminary California is committed to serve Christ and teach his Gospel because it is “the power of salvation to everyone who believes...” (Rom 1:16). It is our conviction that it is through the preaching of the Gospel that Christ has promised to call his people to saving faith and to edify his church (Acts 2:42; Rom 10:12–18).

FOR HIS CHURCH

As someone once said, there are institutions to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, but if the church does not preach and teach the Gospel, no one else will. We believe this is the church’s most fundamental mission - bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to sinners. We exist to support this mission through the education and preparation of future teachers, preachers, and missionaries. To this end we are firmly and happily committed to “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) – the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as expressed in the Reformed confessions and catechisms.

OUR EDUCATION

The WSC education is a Reformed, rigorous study of God’s Word for the sake of Christ and his Church.

- **Biblical.** The WSC education is centered on the inspired, inerrant Word of God, as articulated in the Reformed Confessions of Faith. Therefore, the study of the original languages of Hebrew and Greek is a requirement. Scripture is central in all of our classes, for all of our programs.
- **Personal.** WSC is committed to face-to-face education that is fostered by the close community of faculty and students.
- **Purposeful.** WSC exists to serve Christ, his Gospel, and his Church by preparing the next generation of pastors and leaders.
- **Accredited.** WSC is the only fully accredited, independent, interdenominational Reformed seminary in the Western United States.



**WHERE IS THE WISDOM WE HAVE LOST IN KNOWLEDGE?
WHERE IS THE KNOWLEDGE WE HAVE LOST IN INFORMATION?**

T. S. Eliot asked these haunting questions in 1934, decades before the dawn of our digital age. Eliot’s alarm over wisdom lost in knowledge and knowledge lost in information rings disturbingly true today, with its 24/7 connectivity via omnipresent devices that demand ceaseless attention. Information technology is valuable. But we find ourselves awash in data yet thirsting for wisdom, for the insight that makes sense of life and the skill to make strategic choices.

The faculty of Westminster Seminary California brought these meditations on the wisdom of God to our seminary community in 2016, striving to instill in students the divinely-granted wisdom that enables people to live well for God’s glory and others’ good. Our aim is to draw hearts and minds to Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3—4). Our prayer is that every reader will come to know Jesus better and treasure him as our “wisdom from God, knowledge and righteousness and sanctification” (1 Corinthians 1:30).



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