

## Thursday Morning Bible Study: Proverbs

### Life In God's World For Dummies

#### 4. The Sources Of Wisdom

All wisdom comes from God. Like every good gift—i.e. those gifts that are bountiful with life, truth and blessing—it comes down from the Father of lights (James 1:17.) And so anyone who lacks wisdom must seek wisdom from God: “Let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1:5)

When Solomon became king he was fearfully aware that he lacked the wisdom needed to rule the people of God, he knew he was among the naïve and needed to be granted wisdom: “...I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in... Give you servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?” (1Kings 3:7,9)

Likewise Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar needed the Lord's wisdom to interpret the king's dream—a wisdom that was beyond the “wisdom” of the Babylonian sages. “Daniel went to his house and made the matter known to...his companions, and told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery... Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel... Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven... ‘Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness and the light dwells with him. To you, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and might, and have now made known to me what we asked of you, for you have made known to us the king's matter.’” (Daniel 2:17-23)

The beginning of the receiving of wisdom from God is in the keeping of His commandments. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” (Prov. 1:7) “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the sould; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.” (Psalm 19:7) It is through *meditation* on the LORD's commands that wisdom is granted to His people. To meditate on the law is to memorise, repeat and recall that law, and in so doing to explore what is wonderful and sweet and desirable in that law. It is to give time to think about how that law gives the way of life and truth and blessing. It also is an opening up to us of the truth of God Himself, for the law shines out something of the character and life of God.

In Deuteronomy 4, Moses exhorts the people to give attention to the words of the law of God:

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?" (Deut. 4:1-8)

Wisdom comes to us from the past—from the generations of those faithful to the Lord in the long run, those who ran the good race. Proverbs 4:1-4 says,

Hear, O sons, a father's instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight, for I give you good precepts; do not forsake my teaching. When I was a son with my father, tender, the only one in the sight of my mother, he taught me and said to me, "Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live.

Tradition is previous generations handing down to us something of their own. It is a gift to be treasured, where our forefathers lived in faithfulness. "Our forefathers are not disqualified from speaking into our lives just by the accident of their death."<sup>1</sup> Our current generation is less than fully proven: we cannot yet say that we have run the race and kept the faith; so those who have finished the race have something to say, and know something, that we do not. "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." (Hebrews 13:7) Proverbs 4 alerts us to the precious gift of God in past voices for gaining wisdom. C S Lewis said that after reading a modern book, we should not read another until we have read at least one old book.

Wisdom comes from being a community of faithful and wise people—and associating with wise peers. There is wisdom and safety in a bevy of counsellors, rather than self-reliant independence.

The Proverbs help us see that wisdom is wisdom from whatever source it comes. Part of the tradition we inherit is the wisdom of those who may not have worshipped the living God. The insight they gained is part of the creational reality of being made by the LORD. Proverbs has a number of sections that come from Egyptian wisdom sources that predate Solomon by as much as a millennium. Of course that creational wisdom needs to be re-read and adjusted in the light of the covenant and the law of God.

Creation itself can provide insight and wisdom. Solomon was granted wisdom and he immediately became a student of all things.

God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol, and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish. And people of all nations came to hear the

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Ortlund in *Proverbs: Wisdom That Works*, quoting or paraphrasing G K Chesterton in "The Ethics of Elfland", an essay from *Orthodoxy*.

wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom. (1Kings 3:29-34)

This study led to wisdom that grew out of reflection on what he saw—both instructively and poetically.

Wisdom finds its source also in wisdom—i.e., one of the sources of wisdom is the desiring of wisdom. When James tells us that God gives wisdom “without reproach”, he is saying that the Father is glad to have someone ask for wisdom, for that is in itself wise. The LORD takes the wisdom seeker at the level of wisdom that they come to him and then opens up deeper and broader understanding and insight.