

THE PROVERBS



THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

Wisdom is one of the most important concepts for an understanding of what the New Testament says about Jesus. On the one hand, Jesus was a teacher of wisdom – a sage as teachers of wisdom are called. On the other hand, the New Testament also presents Jesus as the embodiment of divine wisdom. As a teacher of wisdom, Jesus was not primarily a teacher of information (what to believe) or morals (how to behave), but a teacher of the path of transformation – transformation from life in the world of conventional wisdom, to a life centered in God.
Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First time.*

Scripture:

2 Chronicles 1:7-12

God gives Wisdom to Solomon

7 That night God appeared to Solomon, and said to him, ‘Ask what I should give you.’⁸ Solomon said to God, ‘You have shown great and steadfast love to my father David, and have made me succeed him as king.’⁹ O LORD God, let your promise to my father David now be fulfilled, for you have made me king over a people as numerous as the dust of the earth.¹⁰ Give me now wisdom and knowledge to go out and come in before this people, for who can rule this great people of yours?’¹¹ God answered Solomon, ‘Because this was in your heart, and you have not asked for possessions, wealth, honor, or the life of those who hate you, and have not even asked for long life, but have asked for wisdom and knowledge for yourself that you may rule my people over whom I have made you king,¹² wisdom and knowledge are granted to you. I will also give you riches, possessions, and honor, such as none of the kings had who were before you, and none after you shall have the like.’

PROVERBS 9:10

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

PROVERBS 11:2

When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but wisdom is with the humble.

PROVERBS 19:8

To get wisdom is to love oneself; to keep understanding is to prosper.

ECCLESIASTES 10: 1

Dead flies make the perfumer’s ointment give off a foul odor; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.



WHAT I'VE LEARNED

The youth group of a church I served compiled a little booklet they called, "*What I've learned...*" It was full of wisdom and humor, and in its own way it was a little book of proverbs, drawn from the lives of young people in junior and senior high school. Here are a few that I thought were clever:

I've learned it's good to learn how to run heavy machinery. - age 15

I've learned that you need to think about the consequences before you do something. - age 16

I've learned you can never change someone's opinion. - age 18

I've learned sometimes failure is the best motivation for the next test. - age 16

I've learned if you hope for something, it might not always turn out the way you'd like. - age 12

I've learned goldfish can't swim very long in Jell-O. - age 15

I've learned no matter how big or impossible the task seems, there is always a way to get it done. - age 14

I've learned you should keep an open mind, but don't be so open-minded that your brains fall out. - age 16

I've learned it's hard to be a teenager. - age 15

I've learned the hard classes do pay off. - age 17

POETRY AND WISDOM LITERATURE

In the Bible, wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom." We understand "fear" to be respect or reverence, but it is also the fear -- of the Lord's awesome power. Wisdom is the discovery that there are some things in life you cannot control, no matter how smart you become.

Wisdom sayings were for everyday. Wisdom literature is practical advice about life that is carefully crafted and artfully presented. It emphasized our own fate and our behavior as

apposed to our religious history. What the Hebrews called wisdom describes a wide range of human skills from embroidery to divination. Wisdom is "know-how," and common sense.

KING SOLOMON'S WISDOM

And the wisest of all the biblical heroes was King Solomon. Solomon was the successor to King David. While David was the warrior, Solomon was the civilizer, and "Solomon built the Temple." The Hebrews never forgot that. The Book of Kings says that Solomon's legendary wisdom "surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt." (1 Kings 4:30).

By his cunning, Solomon leap-frogged the natural heirs to the throne -- his brothers Absalom and Adonijah -- and he married the daughter of an Egyptian king to cement political alliances.

Solomon established trade links with the richest nations of the world, and a powerful army with which to control them. Solomon had sexual power: he had 700 wives and 300 concubines. And it was God's retribution for Solomon's final disobediences that tore the united Israel apart and resulted in a division of the kingdom after his death. God did to Solomon that which he told the mothers never to do to their children.

Now, you might not think these pieces of historic literature were very dangerous, but they have provoked one of the great debates in our denomination and the World Council of Churches. I'm guessing that most of you will still remember.

SOPHIA – PERSONIFICATION OF WISDOM

Do you remember Sophia? She is the personification of wisdom, and Goddess of the wise.

Sophia came from the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures. She has been in the literature for a long time. Some believe they have rediscovered the missing female goodness of the Old Testament in the wisdom of Sophia. They claim she has appeal particularly to the searching baby boomers and those who follow who are looking for something new, intellectual and feminine among the patriarchal roots of our church. In fact maybe that is what you are looking for.

Here is Elizabeth Johnson's definition of Spirit-Sophia:

Spirit-Sophia is the source of transforming energy among all creatures. She initiates novelty, instigates change, transforms what is dead into new stretches of life. Fertility is intimately related to her recreative power, as is the attractiveness of sex. It is she who is ultimately playful, fascinating, pure and wise, luring human beings into the depths of love. As mover and encourager of what tends toward stasis, Spirit-Sophia inspires human creativity and joy in the struggle. Wherever the gift of healing and liberation in however partial a manner reaches the winterized or damaged earth, or peoples crushed by war and injustice, or individual persons weary, harmed, sick, or lost on life's journey, there the new creation in the Spirit is happening.

-Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is*

This idea was the focus of great controversy and reaction to controversy fifteen years ago in 1993 at the Women's Conference in Minneapolis. I'm not going to recount the votes, but I know a couple of people who were there. While some found a new inspiration from the scriptures, others declared this was going to be the end of good sense, and decency. I thought they were over reacting at the time, and I still do.

MAKING A COMEBACK

Some proverbs teach us how to live nine-hundred years before Christ, and they are not particularly helpful to us. But others have advice that continues to mold character in our daily lives.

Proverbs have been making a comeback lately under the titles of:

- *Life's Little Instruction Books* (volumes 1 – 25 or more),
- *The Chicken Soup for the Soul* series for teenagers, mothers, fathers, pets, and general population has become its own display in almost every section of the bookstores,
- *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*, or anything else.
- And some of the celebrity autobiographies.

THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

Of all reputations for wisdom, Solomon's is pre-eminent; and it rests not only on his own brilliance but also on his patronage of learning and the arts. The Queen of Sheba was but one of a stream of visitors who poured into Israel to hear him and put him to the test.

Perhaps the most famous of the Solomon stories is the story of the two women who claimed one baby as their own. After hearing their story Solomon suggested that the baby be cut in half and given equally to each mother. One of the women reluctantly agreed to the grotesque solution. The other said she would rather surrender her claim to the child completely than have such a thing done. Solomon had no trouble determining the identity of the true mother after that little episode.

Many of the proverbs attributed to Solomon concern themselves with teachability, sobriety, wise speech, kindness, trust in divine help, magnanimity and friendship. There is a certain amount of mere worldly wisdom here, but much, too, that is sound and high-principled, although the biblical material moves at a consistently higher level of informed faith. Another class of literature from these countries wrestles with the problems of suffering and the meaning of existence, arguing the points at considerable length in skillfully constructed poetic monologues and dialogues.

TWO READINGS FROM PROVERBS

Proverbs 31

The Teaching of King Lemuel's Mother

Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Ode to a Capable Wife

A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life. She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from far away. She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household and tasks for her servant-girls. She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong. She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night.

She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy. ... She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple. ... Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her: 'Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.'

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who loves the Lord is to be praised. ... let her works praise her in the city gates.

PROGRESSIVE WISDOM FROM SAUSALITO

I want to conclude with a piece of Modern Wisdom literature. It comes from my friend George who was pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Sausalito, and it announced their new affiliation with the Center for Progressive Christianity. You might find some portions you don't agree with, but on the whole I think this is a statement we need to consider as wisdom for our own church. This comes from the Sausalito Internet Newsletter.

SOME WISDOM OF TODAY SAUSALITO NEWSLETTER EXCERP

GREAT NEWS ... We are now officially affiliated with The Center for Progressive Christianity and listed in their Directory of Progressive Churches - www.tcpc.org - with a link to our own Website. Founded in 1994 by the Rev. Jim Adams, former Rector of St. Mark's Church on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC where he served for 30 years, TCPC is working on many levels to encourage the creation of open and welcoming communities of faith.

As I read the eight points, I wondered if we are a progressive church. You can decide for yourself.

THE EIGHT POINTS:

Original Version

By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who:

1. Proclaim Jesus Christ as our Gate to the realm of God.
2. Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the gateway to God's realm.

3. Understand our sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of God's feast for all peoples.
4. Invite all sorts and conditions of people to join in our worship and in our common life as full partners, including (but not limited to): believers and agnostics, conventional Christians and questioning skeptics, homosexuals and heterosexuals, females and males, the despairing and the hopeful, those of all races and cultures, and those of all classes and abilities, without imposing on them the necessity of becoming like us.
5. Think that the way we treat one another and other people is more important than the way we express our beliefs.
6. Find more grace in the search for meaning than in absolute certainty, in the questions than in the answers.
7. See ourselves as a spiritual community in which we discover the resources required for our work in the world: striving for justice and peace among all people; bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers.
8. Recognize that our faith entails costly discipleship, renunciation of privilege, and conscientious resistance to evil--as has always been the tradition of the church.

A CHALLENGE

I think that is about all the wisdom we can handle today in one sitting.

- Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness and born of wisdom.
- The Proverbs preach, "Say to wisdom, you are my sister, and call insight your intimate friend."



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