

“Developing a Christian Mind, How to Get One and Keep it”

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Session IV

“GETTING WISDOM”

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” (NIV: Proverbs 9:10)

“Skilled living gets its start in the fear-of-God, insight into life from knowing a holy God.”
(Eugene Peterson: *The Message*, Proverbs 9:10)

“My son, keep sound wisdom and discretion; let them not escape from your sight, and they will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck. Then you will walk on your way securely and your foot will not stumble.” (Proverbs 3:21-23) (RSV)

How would you answer the following questions: *Do you ever feel as though you have all of the wisdom you need in making decisions and living life? How does one become ‘a wise person’? What does the “knowledge of God” have to do with it?*

The Development of the Idea of Wisdom

“The wisdom literature of the Old Testament is a literary type common to the Ancient Near East that included short sayings (Proverbs), longer reflections on life (Ecclesiastes) and dialogues which deal with the problems of life (Job). The basic idea is reflected in the Hebrew word “hokmah” and related words translated “understanding” and “insight”. Basically wisdom is the intensely practical art of being skillful and successful in life... The seat of wisdom is the heart, which is the center of moral and intellectual decision (I Kings 3)... Wisdom is the life of worship extended to the home and marketplace.”¹ Wisdom is the practice of our faith in practice outside the church.

Learning to Be Wise

Learning to be a wise was a learning process of personal discipleship. One learned to be wise by walking with the wise (those who lived long enough and had enough life experience) to gain “intuitive insight into life, its dangers and joys.”² The key words of the learning process were: instruction, reproof, and correction.

Wisdom Comes from God

Just where in the Bible does one find Wisdom Literature? In the Old Testament: Ecclesiastes, Job, and Psalms 19, 37, 104, 107, 148; likewise in the New Testament: the Book of James.

God is seldom described as ‘wise’ in the Bible (I Kings 3:28; Isaiah 10:13; 31:2; Jeremiah 10:12; 51:15; Daniel 5:11), even in the Wisdom books ((Job 9:4; Psalm 104:24; Proverbs 23:19),

¹ William Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979) 189.

² Dyrness, 192.

probably because God's wisdom so transcends human wisdom.³ Rather God is recognized as the giver of wisdom.

In ancient Israel, wisdom was understood in close relationship with faith in God and the obligations of being a people of the covenant. This is summed up in Proverbs 2:1-6 which speaks of the moral benefit of wisdom:

“My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it like silver and search for it as hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and knowledge and understanding.” (NIV)

This fits beautifully in getting a comprehensive view of the Book of Proverbs and beginning to see the big picture of the role wisdom plays in our lives. We first see this in the prologue to Proverbs which introduces us to the purpose and theme:

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.” (Proverbs 1:7)

“The fear of the Lord” quickly assumed the position of motto of Proverbs.⁴ If one wanted to ‘get wisdom they must first come to ‘fear the Lord.’ To fear God was ‘to turn from evil’ as you turn to the Lord in a life of faith and trust.” This is something only God can and does do. As Old Testament scholar Walt Kaiser says: “Only by such a commitment could one be enabled by the God who created the world to enjoy the otherwise mundane activities of eating, drinking, and making a living. The wholeness of life, its patterns of meaning, its integration of faith, knowledge, and actions, and its significance were then realized...”⁵

“He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken away from it. God does it so men will revere him.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11-14)

God who created us in his image (with eternal value) has built into us a spiritual thirst that can only be satisfied by him. We were made for a purpose: “to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”⁶ Our good God wants us to enjoy life. Only when we “get wisdom” and have this view of God are we able to discover real pleasure in life and enjoy whatever we have as gifts from God (rather than as what we have accumulated).

³ H.L. Drumright, “Wisdom” in the Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol. V (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Publishing Company, 1975) 939-945.

⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978) 67.

⁵ Kaiser, 67.

⁶ The Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q & A # 1.

This is also the answer to life: we are meant to revere, stand in awe of, the all powerful God. All of this moves us beyond *what we know* to *who we know*.⁷

Examples of Wisdom as Faith in Action

The great personalities of the Bible who exemplify the wisdom as faith in action are King Solomon and Jesus the Messiah. There is so much that has been written and can be said of each one that for the purpose of this study, we focus specifically on how we see wisdom in and through their lives.

The son of Israel's most beloved King David and his wife Bethsheba, Solomon was chosen by God to succeed David as King. His story is told in I Kings 1-11 and we read his wisdom in Proverbs 1-3, 10-11 and in Song of Songs 1-8 and some would argue, in Ecclesiastes. Certainly he is remembered in forefront of the Bible's wisdom literature. It all begins in I Kings 3 when the young king (age twenty) met God in a dream that would change his life...

"At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." Solomon answered, "You have shown great kindness to my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day.

"Now, O my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this people of yours?"

"The LORD was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, "Since you have asked for this and not for a long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice. I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover I will give you what you have not asked for—both riches and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in my ways and obey my statutes and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life."
(I Kings 3:5-14)

If God were to say to you, ***"Ask for whatever you want me to give you."*** What would you ask for? Early in his reign, Solomon had the good sense to recognize his need for wisdom to rule his kingdom. He must have felt his need for wisdom following the long reign of Israel's greatest king, his father David. So he asked for a discerning heart to make right decisions. Solomon received "a wise and discerning heart" from God but it was up to him to apply that wisdom in all the areas of his life.

⁷ This has been described as "faith seeking understanding". See Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*.

Almost immediately, he is put to the test in choosing the real mother of a baby who is claimed by two women (I Kings 3:16-28). Solomon is able to see to the heart of the matter and render a wise and just verdict. Likewise, Solomon became world renown for his wisdom (I Kings 4:28-34). Indeed, ***“Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who heard his wisdom.”*** (I Kings 4:34)⁸

No doubt his greatest accomplishment was building the Temple (I Kings 6-8) which had been the great desire of his father David. God did not allow David to build the temple because he was ‘a man of war’ but promised this to his son, Solomon, who was ‘a man of peace’. It is here that God appears to Solomon the second time (I Kings 9:1-9).

God’s gift of wisdom did not mean that he could not make mistakes. While he was successful in his public life where he led Israel through its golden age of peace and prosperity, he allowed success, prosperity, and physical pleasure to rule his personal life.

“King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh’s daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations which the LORD had told the Israelites, “You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.” Nevertheless Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been.” (I Kings 11:1-6)

When God appears to Solomon for the last time, it is with words of judgment (I Kings 11:9-13).

Others who exemplified “the fear of the Lord” were honored with wisdom (Moses, Joshua, Deborah, David, Jonathan, Abigail, Nehemiah, Job, Esther and the prophets who spoke for God and applied his Word to their time and spoke of the future fulfillment of the promises of God in the coming Messiah. It is Isaiah who speaks of the sevenfold spirit of Immanuel in Isaiah 11:1-3 who will have:

***“The Spirit of the Lord will rest upon him—
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and power,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD—
and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.”***

Old Testament scholar, Walt Kaiser explains it best when he writes:

“As far back as 2 Samuel 14, 16, and d 20, wisdom was presented as a political virtue. Kings and rulers needed it if they were to rule a people or towns (Proverbs 8:14-16). But wisdom also belongs to the character of God and originated in the fear of Him. Therefore, when Isaiah 11:1-10 states that the future government of a Davidic descendant would possess the political virtue of “wisdom” (hokmah) along with the other wisdom themes of “understanding” (binah), “counsel” (esah), “might” (geburah),

⁸ Also see I Kings 10 where we are told of the visit of the Queen of Sheba.

“knowledge” (da’at), and the “fear of the LORD” (yir’at YHWH)—“His delight is in the fear of the LORD”—the connection is more than accidental. It is deliberate!”⁹

Now we have a new understanding of the Gospel writer, Luke, telling us about when at the age of twelve, Jesus sat with the teachers in the Temple courts *“listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.”* Then concludes Jesus’ boyhood by saying, *“And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and all men.”* (Luke 2:47, 52)

We read of Jesus’ return to his hometown to speak in the synagogue in Nazareth with new understanding. Luke tells us: *“He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went to the synagogue as was his custom. And he stood to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:*

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”¹⁰*

“Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened upon him, and he began by saying to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’” (Luke 4:16-21)

⁹ Kaiser, 68.

¹⁰ Isaiah 61:1-2