

BaptistWay Bible Series for November 5: God is the only source of true wisdom

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God is the only source of true wisdom

- Proverbs 1:7; 3:1-20

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Where does one go to find true knowledge and wisdom?

Sages, saints and everyday citizens have asked that question, in one form or another, through the ages.

And through the ages, the Judeo-Christian faith and its holy Scriptures have answered that fundamental question clearly and consistently: True wisdom finds its source in God alone. Or, as Proverbs puts it, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (1:7).

Guidelines for interpretation

As we begin this brief, four-week excursion into the world of Proverbs,

several introductory comments about the purpose and nature of this fascinating book can help guide us.

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- The original purpose of Proverbs was to serve as an instructional manual, a kind of textbook for life, used for moral and intellectual training of young men for successful adulthood within Jewish faith and culture, according to theologian R.B.Y. Scott.
- Proverbs is essentially “a collection of collections of wisdom materials” gathered over time, David Hubbard points out in his commentary on the book. The existence of different collections is evident from the way the materials finally were organized as the book of Proverbs.
- Proverbs is composed of two primary types of literature—instructions or admonitions, usually directed to “my son” or “sons,” and poetic speeches in which wisdom is often personified. Both of these are evident in Proverbs 3:1-20.

Both types are composed in the distinctive form of Hebrew poetry. While many of the nuances in the original language are lost or diffused in translation, the poetic device of parallelism, characteristic of Semitic literature, generally is retained in our English translations.

The most prominent form is “synonymous parallelism” in which the second line restates the first, usually with synonyms, as a way of reinforcing the meaning (see 3:1). In “antithetic parallelism,” the second line contrasts the

first with its opposite viewpoint, often to emphasize the “two ways” between wise and foolish or right and wrong (see 1:7). The third form, “synthetic parallelism,” uses the second (or sometimes the third) line to complete the sense of the first. The first thought is extended or enhanced by the additional line or lines (see 3:12).

- In seeking to understand Proverbs, it is important to adopt a discipline of reading and interpreting this book on its own terms. While much of Proverbs may sound not only foreign but overly simplistic to our modern ears, it is important to recognize that as wisdom literature, Proverbs “has its own way of looking at life” and, therefore, “its own way of using words,” Hubbard says.

We do well not only to see this book for what it is, but also to keep in mind that the early church chose for good and enduring reasons to retain this collection of wisdom sayings in the canon. These proverbs still have much to teach if approached with open minds and humble hearts, allowing the ancient wisdom to speak their truth to a culture that seldom takes time to listen to the sages of our faith.

- Finally, it is equally important to see Proverbs within its larger biblical context. Proverbs is one voice among many in a complex dialogue that gives texture and depth to biblical faith. As with any book of the Bible, Proverbs ultimately should be studied and interpreted within the larger context of all Scripture and especially in light of the life and teachings of Jesus.

Proverbs contains insights for living gained through generations of experience, but it does not say everything that needs to be said (and heard) about the life of faith. As maxims, the very nature of proverbs leans toward oversimplification. Indeed, in the larger context, some of the proverbs are clarified, challenged and even contradicted by other areas of scripture.

A motto to live by (1:7)

The statement, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” not only is a motto for the book of Proverbs, but also a kind of motto for life, a “preamble to wise living,” theologian Rolland Schloebb says.

While the etymology of the word translated “fear” certainly contains an element of fear and even terror in the presence of Almighty God, its meaning is better understood as “reverence” or awe. Reverence includes the recognition that God is God, and we are not; that God is the Creator, and we are the created beings. This reverence, as we have seen earlier in the Psalms, includes an awareness that there is more to life than what appears on the surface, that there is a presence and power infinitely greater than ourselves.

The Hebrew word translated “beginning” has an important two-fold meaning of beginning as both a “starting point” and as “chief part.” In this sense, true knowledge or wisdom finds its origin in God and God alone.

This affirmation of faith forces us to confess that too often we neither “fear” God in the sense of fear and reverence nor turn to God as the starting point and source of wisdom for living. The sad truth is that even as believers, we live daily with a kind of “practical atheism.” We don’t hate or despise God; indeed, we claim to love God. Yet we seek knowledge and pursue wisdom without consulting God; we live most of the time as if God doesn’t exist.

The blessings of wisdom (3:1-20)

Chapter 3 consists of three discourses, each beginning with “my son” (vv. 1-10, 11-20, and 21-35). The first section consists of a series of admonitions or commands followed in each case by the reasons for them. The

admonition—“do not forget my teaching” (v. 1)—that begins this section emphasizes the critical role of “remembering” for the life of faith (v. 8). Repeatedly in Scripture, we are called to “remember” what is most important. In so doing, we will find wisdom for life.

Verses 5-6, committed to memory by many Christians, speak of a trustful attitude and a way of life rooted in a relationship with God. It is out of this trust in a trustworthy God that we experience the blessings of wisdom described in this section.

Novelist and short story writer Honoré de Balzac, who wrote about everyone and everything related to 19th-century French society, offered the confession that “I am not deep, but I am very wide.” The wisdom of Proverbs can help lead us from shallow living to deeper lives of faith, trust and meaning.

Discussion questions

- In what ways do the introductory guidelines for interpreting Proverbs inform your approach to this book of wisdom?
- Where does our American culture encourage us to turn for wisdom? Do these sources point us toward God or away from God? Why?
- Think of a Christian you would describe as wise, and list the qualities that make that person wise.



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