

BETTER THAN GOLD

The Life-Changing Wisdom Of The Bible

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Three thousand years ago Solomon wrote, "Wisdom is more profitable than silver, and her wages are better than gold. . . . Nothing you desire can compare with her" (Prov. 3:14-15 NLT).

Today we are experiencing information overload and unsolved problems that show why we need the wisdom Solomon was talking about.

I hope the following pages, adapted from a series of articles I've written over the last few years, will help you understand why, at RBC, we say our mission is "to make the life-changing wisdom of the Bible understandable and accessible to all."

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THE NEED FOR WISDOM

If I could write an open letter to reflect some of my own spiritual journey, I think it would read something like this:

“Dear Aaron, I hope you are doing well. I miss our conversations about life, religion, and the Detroit Tigers. Even more, I regret that we haven’t kept in touch after your move to Philadelphia.

“I’m writing now because I am beginning to see my need for a wisdom you didn’t find in me.

“I remember, Aaron, that you used to say, ‘As a group, church people aren’t better than anyone else; they just think they are. The best people I know never darken the door of a church.’

“Even though I argued with you at the time, you helped me see that people

who build hospitals, orphanages, and rescue missions in the name of Christ aren’t the only ones working for the benefit of humanity.

“I remember the letters to the editor you wrote, and the streets you walked, to protest the wrongs of racism, the evils of war, and the pollution of the environment.

“Since the last time we talked, I’ve traveled enough internationally to see the hospitality and goodwill of people of non-Christian cultures. In other countries, as in our own, I’ve seen that a person doesn’t have to believe in Christ to be loving, gracious, and even heroic in the face of human need.

“Such experiences over the years have reminded me of the disbelief I saw in your eyes whenever I talked to you about becoming a new person in Christ. I

remember the questions you asked when I quoted the words of the apostle Paul, 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.' You told me that you didn't buy it because you had grown up in the church and knew firsthand that these were not people for whom all things had become new.

"Well, Aaron, I wish I had been quicker to listen and slower to say more than I knew. Along the way I've seen enough in myself and in others to give me second thoughts about what I had said to you. Somewhere along the line I started asking questions like: If believing in Christ changes people's hearts, why do so many of His followers turn out to be moralistic, self-righteous, angry people? Why does faith in Christ produce changes that are

more like the honeymoon phase of a marriage than a lasting change in life?

"At this point, I admit that my spiritual journey has run parallel to what I've learned in marriage. What doesn't change in either one is the human baggage we bring into both. The independent inclinations that were a part of me before and after marriage were also a part of me before and after I put my faith in Christ. The self-centeredness that makes it difficult for me to hear the concerns of my wife also makes it hard for me to hear the voice of Christ living in me.

"It took time for me to discover that in salvation and in marriage, growth and maturity would not come automatically or easily. In both cases, I was not prepared for what turned out to be the greatest challenges of my

life. What I didn't realize beforehand is that the biggest enemy I would ever face would be my own unchanged inclination toward self-centeredness.

"I don't mean to understate all the wonderful sides of marriage or conversion. But I can see now how wrong my expectations had been. I had looked to salvation to make me good, as I had looked to marriage to make me happy. I didn't see that in both cases my own human nature would stack the deck against me if I didn't do whatever it took to learn and live the wisdom of Christ.

"Aaron, as I look back on some of our conversations, it's clear that I was wrong in assuming that my whole life had changed through faith in Christ. It didn't occur to me that whenever the Bible encourages us to love, or to

pray, or to think and speak honestly, it's because we are so inclined to do just the opposite.

"Yes, Aaron, my thinking has changed a lot since the last time we talked. Life has been a lot harder than I expected. Looking back, I can see that my faith didn't automatically make me good or wise.

"I now see more clearly the parallel between being married and entering into a relationship with Christ. Upon a couple's public confession, a minister declares a man and woman married, but not mature in their love. And when we put our faith in Christ, God declares us legally blameless, but not good or wise. In both cases, there is a difference between the legal declaration and the resulting quality of life.

"I now believe that church people, in our best moments, have a lot in

common with members of a 12-step recovery group. We attend meetings and work the program, not because we are better than others but because we know we need God and one another to overcome the problems that are consuming us.

***“Walk in wisdom
toward those who
are outside***

***Let your
speech always
be with grace.”***

(Col. 4:5-6)

“I only wish, Aaron, that I had understood years ago that to believe in Christ is not the same thing as sharing His wisdom.

“Thanks for listening. If you’re ever inclined, I’d love to hear something of where you are in your own spiritual journey.”

THE WISDOM OF REALISM

In art, Realists paint life with blemishes, wrinkles, and scars. Idealists paint a subject as they imagine it could be, or should be.

On the rough roads of life, both are important. Ideals give us direction. Realism gives us traction.

Without wisdom, both have their downsides. Realism can cost us our dreams. Idealism can consume our days in a futile search for the perfect marriage, the perfect job, or the perfect life.

Wisdom is also needed to see how idealism and realism relate to each other in matters of faith. Some think of God as an idealistic, demanding parent who can never really be pleased. Others think of Him as a realistic grandparent who is so

indulging and compassionate that there's no reason to take Him seriously.

The Bible, however, shows us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of a wisdom that ends up showing us how much He loves us (Prov. 9:10; 1 Jn. 4:18-19).

Such wisdom acknowledges a God who is good enough to inspire us with His ideals, merciful enough to accept us as we are, and too loving to leave us as He finds us.

***“Oh, the depth
of the riches
both of the
wisdom and
knowledge
of God!”
(Rom. 11:33)***

THE MARRED IDEALISM OF THE BIBLE

In a perfect world, we would live forever. That's how the drama of the Bible begins and ends. Everything is good.

Within the opening chapters of Genesis, however, our first parents lose their innocence and immortality. Later, their first son kills his younger brother, and a succession of good and bad days take turns raising hopes and ruining them.

Even as the world drifted further and further from its original condition, the anticipation of a return to paradise began to appear in the message of the prophets.

Someday, according to the prophet Isaiah, weapons of war will be recycled into tools of agriculture (Isa. 2:4), and even a defenseless lamb

will eat safely at the side of a wolf (65:25). To this vision, the New Testament apostle John added, “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4).

Yet, the idealism of the Bible is not just about the future. Both Testaments also call us to love God with all of our heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Both emphasize not only the moral rule of “love,” but also the virtues of “joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23).

No society passes laws against such ideals. Yet no one consistently lives up to them either. So how do we come to terms with a God who warned our first

parents that if they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they would die? (Gen. 2:15-17). How can we relate to a God who removed the first man and woman from their garden paradise after doing nothing more than eating a piece of fruit He had warned them about? How could we ever feel safe with a Creator who imposed pain and death on our world for what appears to be such a minor infraction of trust? (Gen. 3:16-19).

THE REALISM OF THE RABBIS

One answer comes from first-century Judaism. Some rabbis taught that if we keep just one law because God commanded it, it is as if we have kept the whole law.

At first look, this approach to living up to the expectations of God sounds like a reasonable

solution. We all know that none of us can keep all of the law all of the time. Maybe we can keep some rules some of the time, or at least one rule one time.

But would any wise teacher of the law really mean that as long as you don't kill your neighbors you can steal from them? We need to give the rabbis more credit than to think that's what they meant. We must be missing something about the profound way in which they weighed our duty to the law of God. They must have been talking about keeping one law in such a way as to honor the rest.

THE REALISM OF JAMES

Whatever the rabbis meant when they took a "one for all" approach to the law, another teacher expressed our accountability to God differently. A follower of

Jesus named James wrote, "Whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all" (Jas. 2:10).

The rabbis who focused on the law we keep rather than on the ones we break seem to be more realistic. The rest of James' letter, however, shows a wisdom that is realistic about the ideals of God. When James presses the logic of law, he is pushing people who have already been forgiven to remember the principle of love that is at the heart of every law of God (2:12-13).

James was writing as a follower of Christ (1:1) who saw that his faith in Christ compelled him to pursue the ideal of neighbor love, not in order to be forgiven but because he had already received the forgiveness and mercy of God (2:8). In the most realistic and down-to-earth ways, he urged those

who had accepted Christ to reflect the heart of the One who had brought them to Himself (1:26–2:8).

James knew he was writing to people who were being persecuted for believing in Christ. He saw that it would take wisdom for them to see how to show their faith even while they themselves were being hurt and hounded by all kinds of troubles and temptations. So he wrote, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him” (Jas. 1:5).

***“If any of you
lacks wisdom,
let him ask
of God.”
(Jas. 1:5)***

The wisdom James offered his readers was not merely the insight of philosophy and knowledge. It was the insight that God Himself wanted to give His people so they could reflect the ideals of Jesus in the most rugged and realistic of conditions.

THE REALISM OF JESUS

In contrast with other religious leaders who condemned and separated themselves from those they regarded as moral refuse, Jesus earned a reputation as being a friend of sinners. The gospel writer Luke took note of the way Jesus linked these friendships with wisdom. He quoted Christ as saying,

*The Son of Man
has come eating and
drinking, and you say,
“Look, a glutton and a
winebibber, a friend of tax
collectors and sinners!”*

*But wisdom is justified
by all her children
(Lk. 7:34-35).*

***“You say, ‘Look,
a glutton and
a winebibber,
a friend of tax
collectors and
sinners!’***

***But wisdom
is justified by all
her children.”***
(Lk. 7:34-35)

Time has shown the wisdom of Jesus. If He had avoided and condemned those who needed Him, He would not be remembered and loved for His life-changing wisdom.

Instead of morally condemning people caught in their own self-destructive lives, Jesus was kind to

them. He reached out to people other religious leaders avoided. He ate and drank with people other men of the cloth wouldn't be caught dead with. He touched lepers, respected women, and loved children.

In the process, Jesus personified the wisdom of God. By His example and teaching, He brought together the most inspiring idealism with the most rugged realism. Nowhere do we find a better picture of what it means to be faithful to the highest principles while offering mercy to the most broken people.

When Jesus pressed the logic of moral idealism to self-righteous people, He did so to lovingly humble them (Mt. 5:20-48). When He offered mercy instead of morality, He did so to show that He had come not to condemn but to rescue (Jn. 3:17; 12:47).

THE MEANING OF WISDOM

What does it take to be wise? In a series of TV commercials for online yellow pages, actor David Carradine plays a guru to young seekers. When asked how to find enlightenment, the guru says that it's found in yellowbook.com. He tells his students that everyone is searching for something, and that yellowbook.com makes it possible to find whatever they are looking for by just typing in what and where.

The ad is insightful. Wisdom does involve the practical use of knowledge to get what we are looking for. The commercial is also right in suggesting that wisdom is more accessible than many of us might have thought.

Could it be that easy? As we have already seen, New Testament writer James said

that followers of Christ can have wisdom for the asking. With a promise that sounds too good to be true, he wrote, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (Jas. 1:5).

James added only one condition—that our request for insight needs to be backed up by a desire to trust God in the middle of our problems (vv.6-8).

WHY WOULD WE NEED WISDOM FROM GOD?

Let's remember that James was writing to people who were struggling with problems that tested their faith (Jas. 1:2-3). As first-century followers of Christ, they probably had counted the cost of religious and social persecution. But they might not have foreseen all of the ways they would also

disappoint and disillusion one another.

From the beginning, Jesus had taught His disciples to love one another (Jn. 15:17). Yet, just a few years later, His followers were at war with one another (Jas. 4:1-2).

These first followers of Jesus showed that those who belong to Him may not always act like it. With prejudice, hurtful words, and outright hypocrisy, the family and friends of Jesus can act like enemies.

It is in this conflict-filled setting that James used the introductory words of his letter to assure his readers that the wisdom we need is closer than we might have thought (1:5). But he did more than tell us how to find it. Before he was done writing, he showed us how to recognize a wisdom that comes from “above” rather than from “below” (3:13-17).

WHAT DOES WISDOM FROM GOD LOOK LIKE?

After writing about problems as timeless as prejudice and poverty, James gave his readers a description of the kind of wisdom God is ready to give His people. In the third chapter of his letter he wrote:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then

peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy (3:13-17).

Let's take a closer look at the distinguishing marks of the wisdom that comes "from above." James said this practical insight is . . .

"Pure." James first wanted his readers to remember that the wisdom from "above" doesn't mix faith in Christ with self-centered desires (3:14-17; 4:1-3).

The fact that wisdom starts with motive can be an eye-opener for those of us who, in the middle of a conflict, are ready to do anything we can to get what we want. If our prayers could be translated into straight talk, many of them would say, "Please, just tell me. What do I have to do to get what I want when I want it?"

But as honorable as it

may seem to be ready to do whatever we can to solve a problem, James revealed that the wisdom of God first asks some other questions. Why am I so upset? Where is my heart? What motives am I bringing to this conflict? Is my first and overriding intent really to trust Christ and show my confidence in His ability to provide for me? Or is there something I think I need to have to be happy, or satisfied, or safe?

Only to the extent that our motive is to trust Christ and show His presence in us can we respond to conflict in a way that is genuinely . . .

"Peaceable." When our hearts resonate with the heart of God, we long for real peace rather than conflict. Even when circumstances can never be the same again, "the wisdom that is from above" helps us to see

the foolishness of a bitter or vengeful spirit.

Wisdom that enables us to value rightly motivated peace over conflict (1:5) is a gift from God. It is a new goal that gives birth to wisdom that is . . .

“Gentle.” In the ancient world, this word was used of kings who wore their power with dignity, forbearance, and appropriate leniency toward their subjects.

Today, in the middle of mutual disappointments and hurts, this is the kind of wisdom that enables citizens of King Jesus to represent His authority with a royal spirit of kindness. A listening ear and a gentle voice can lower the temperature of a difficult moment.

Such strong and purposeful gentleness becomes a basis for wisdom that is . . .

“Willing To Yield.”

Because it takes two to tangle, one person who is willing to give up the urge to get even can make a difference. Instead of repaying wrong for wrong, a willingness to return good for evil is an expression of strength rather than weakness.

Relying on God, rather than merely focusing on the one who has hurt us, enables us to work patiently for an outcome that is . . .

“Full Of Mercy And Good Fruits.” When our heart is yielded to the wisdom of Christ, we see the value of planting seeds of undeserved kindness while waiting for the fruit of peace. With the insight that comes from above, we give others the space they need to think for themselves. In the grace of patience, we give one another time to experience the growing

influence of Christ in our own lives.

Rather than responding to others in a near-sighted and superficial way, we show a wisdom that is . . .

“Without Partiality.”

Earlier in his letter, James wrote about followers of Christ who were inclined to treat people of wealth and influence better than the poor and needy (2:1-10). But here in chapter 3 he says that responding to others without partiality is a way of showing the wisdom and heart of God.

Rising above the influence of wealth, social standing, or appearance enables us to show the presence of Christ. It also enables us to live with a wisdom that is . . .

“Without Hypocrisy.”

This seventh identifying mark of wisdom caps the rest. James used it to celebrate the integrity of the wisdom God wants to give

us. He knows that in our better moments none of us wants to talk the language of faith while practicing the goals and politics of envy and ambition.

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT FROM GOD’S WISDOM?

From the beginning of his letter, James showed us that God doesn’t make wisdom easily accessible just to help us get what we want when we want it (1:2-5; 4:1-3). His insights were given to enable us to develop patience and a maturity that is full of the spirit of Christ.

Together these characteristics of wisdom may not give us the quick resolution of conflict we are hoping for. But at the very minimum they give us hearts that are marked by the attitudes of peace rather than the appetites or impulses of war (3:18).

THE WISDOM OF CAUTION

In April 2006, a man attempted to jump from the top of the Empire State Building.

At the last minute, security guards physically restrained him and New York City police charged him with first-degree reckless endangerment. A judge later dismissed the charges, noting that the man had taken steps to ensure the safety of others.

The man's name is Jeb Corliss. His extreme sport of choice is jumping from the world's tallest structures with a parachute strapped to his back. Prior to his Empire State attempt, he had made 3,000 successful jumps, including leaps from the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, the Eiffel Tower, and the Golden Gate Bridge.

A MORE DANGEROUS LEAP

As dangerous as Jeb's extreme sport might sound, it's not nearly as risky as another kind of jumping we all tend to do. Without regard for the ways of wisdom, we jump to wrong conclusions about important issues.

The Bible gives us a classic example of such a leap. It happened in about 1400 BC and carries the importance of one of those "first events" that sets a precedent and tone of caution for the days that follow.

The 7-year conquest of the "Promised Land" was coming to an end. Soldiers of families that had settled on the east side of the Jordan River had gone home to be reunited with their families (Josh. 22).

Just as peace was coming to Israel, someone in the west heard that east-

side families had built a huge altar. Because the law of Moses did not allow unauthorized places of sacrifice, word spread quickly that “the east side” was sliding back into idolatry. Rumors spread and tempers flared about a brash event that seemed to be risking the security of the whole family.

Just a few years earlier, when some of the people of Israel became entangled in the worship of foreign gods, God sent a plague that killed 24,000 (Num. 25:9). And later, the unfaithful actions of a man by the name of Achan caused God’s anger to fall on the whole nation (Josh. 7).

With such national crises fresh in their minds, the families of the west moved quickly. The record of Joshua tells us, “When the children of Israel heard of it, the whole congregation of the children

of Israel gathered together at Shiloh to go to war against them” (Josh. 22:12).

Shiloh means “place of rest.” But those gathered there were ready to wage a civil war to defend their national honor and security.

WISE COUNSEL

Before the rush to judgment was complete, however, wisdom prevailed. At Sinai, ancestors of the “chosen people” had agreed to a law that told them what to do in just such an occasion. If a community in Israel turned away to worship other gods, they were to “inquire, search out, and ask diligently. And if it is indeed true and certain that such an abomination was committed among you, you shall surely strike the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, utterly destroying it, all that is in it and its livestock—with the edge of

the sword” (Dt. 13:14-15).

In keeping with these instructions, the people of the west formed a delegation of family leaders to do some fact-finding. They asked a man who had earned their respect in an earlier crisis to lead the group (Num. 25:1-9; Josh. 22:13-14).

UNEXPECTED ANSWERS

When the delegation reached their brothers in the east, they were ready for the worst. They accused the eastern tribes of ignoring the past and endangering the future of the whole nation.

Then came the surprise. After listening to the accusations, spokespersons for the east assured the delegation that they did not intend to sacrifice at this altar. Because the Jordan River divided them from the rest of the family, they built

the altar as a national unity memorial (Josh. 22:24-27). They wanted future generations to remember their relationship to the whole nation and the God of Israel.

When the investigative council returned home, all Israel celebrated the outcome. The altar was not what they thought it was. It was, in the words of their brothers, “a witness between us that the Lord is God” (v.34).

If the urge to jump to a wrong conclusion had been acted on, many would have died. A family would have gone to war with itself. The Lord’s name would have been dishonored in the region.

Jumping off the Empire State Building might seem reckless and dangerous, even with a parachute. But nothing is more dangerous for ourselves and others than jumping too quickly

to conclusions that can lead to lost reputations, family division, and even war.

What the children of Israel learned, we must see for ourselves. There are so many ways to jump to false conclusions. Hearing only one side of a conflict (Prov. 18:17), assuming guilt by association (Lk. 7:34), and repeating harmful unconfirmed information as if it is fact (Josh. 22:11) are only a few of the leaps that harm ourselves and others.

*“Be quick
to listen, slow
to speak,
and slow to
become angry”
(Jas. 1:19 NIV).*

Let’s remind one another that if a rumor is important enough to cause concern, it

is important enough to confirm.

None of us can afford to act impulsively on our natural inclination to think the worst about others. We all have a history of acting on unconfirmed reports. We all have reason to hear the wisdom of James who urged us to “be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (Jas. 1:19 NIV).

THE STORY OF SOLOMON’S WISDOM

From a distance, it would be easy to idealize Solomon. The Bible tells us about his enormous wealth and influence. His national building projects are a tribute to his vision. His down-to-earth proverbs reflect his wisdom.

On closer look, though, Solomon had a difficult and

troubled life that can tell us a lot about ourselves and our God.

HIS PARENTS' SCANDAL

Solomon was the child of his father's marriage to Bathsheba. He had roots in his father's dark side. Solomon's mother was married to another man when King David had an adulterous relationship with her and then had her husband killed to cover up the scandal.

The fact that the Lord loved Solomon (2 Sam. 12:24) and made him into one of the wisest men the world has ever known illustrates a principle established throughout Scripture. *God does not hold us accountable for the sins of our fathers.*

HIS DIVIDED FAMILY

Solomon came to the throne in the middle of

family conflict. When David was about to die, his oldest son by another wife tried to steal the throne.

At a critical moment, Bathsheba intervened and reminded the king that he had promised the throne to her son. She urged him to realize that if he didn't keep his promise, she and Solomon would be despised after David was gone because of their association with David's sin (1 Ki. 1:1-21). Solomon's experience is a reminder that *our enemies cannot keep us from doing what God has planned for us.*

HIS COMPROMISED BEGINNING

Solomon's first acts as king took place in an atmosphere of cultural and religious compromise. From the beginning of his reign, Solomon seemed determined to shed his father's reputation as a man

of war. In an apparent effort to encourage good relations with Israel's southern neighbor, he married the pagan daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt (1 Ki. 3:1). In addition, Solomon and his people were worshipping on high places used by the people of the land in an attempt to get close to their

“Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David, except that he sacrificed and burned incense at the high places.”
(1 Sam. 3:3)

gods (3:2-3). Such worship had been forbidden since the days of Moses (Dt. 12:2). Yet Solomon had a place in his heart for the

Lord of Israel, and God was patient with him. His experience is a reminder that *in our broken world, God can work with our desire to honor Him—even when we don't understand how messed up we are.*

HIS SLEEP TO SUCCESS

One of Solomon's most famous decisions happened while he was asleep. To this day, he is remembered for the way he responded to an opportunity the rest of us can only dream of. When the Lord appeared to him and offered to give him the desires of his heart, Solomon did not ask for wealth and a long life. Instead, he asked for understanding and discernment to lead the nation entrusted to him. As a result, God said that He was pleased and promised to give Solomon not only an understanding heart, but

wealth and honor as well. What some have overlooked, however, is that Solomon made his request while asleep. The whole conversation occurred in a dream (1 Ki. 3:15). His experience reminds us that *God can work with us in ways that say far more about His goodness than our own.*

HIS UNIMPRESSIVE SHOWCASE

Solomon's first recorded act of wisdom was to settle a tragic conflict between two women of the street. God could have showcased his gift of wisdom by leading Solomon to match wits with world-class minds. Instead, Solomon's first act of recorded wisdom was to settle a conflict between two prostitutes. Both had recently given birth to the babies of absent fathers. But one of the women had lost her baby through an accidental death and was

now claiming to be the real mother of the surviving newborn. The two women appealed to Solomon to settle their dispute. Without modern forensics, but with God-given insight into human nature, Solomon was able to give the rightful mother her baby (1 Ki. 3:16-28).

Solomon's first recorded act of wisdom reminds us that *God has a heart for the kind of people many would dismiss as unworthy.*

HIS DOUBLE-VISION

Solomon showed us how to look for the two sides of human nature. By the alarming but effective method of threatening to "divide the baby" between the two women, Solomon found two responses. One woman was willing to see the baby dead rather than in the arms of the other woman. The second showed she would rather

give the child away than to see it die. By surfacing some of the best and worst sides of human nature, Solomon brought justice and mercy to a messy conflict. His ability to surface the affections of a mother's heart reminds us that *wisdom looks for the difference between lingering evidence of our creation in the likeness of God and emerging expressions of our rebellion against Him.*

HIS PATHETIC ENDING

Solomon's wisdom did not keep even him from playing the fool. In spite of all the wonderful insight Solomon had, he ended up doing what the kings of Israel were forbidden to do (Dt. 17:14-20). In ways that were specifically forbidden, he used his position to serve himself at the expense of the citizens of Israel. In outrageously self-indulgent

ways, he multiplied personal wealth, wives, and sexual partners. Then, just about the time we might think he could do no worse, Solomon built altars to the pagan gods of his wives on the hills surrounding Jerusalem (1 Ki. 11:1-8). Solomon's life shows us something very important. *Wisdom can help only if we obey God and use the insight He gives us.*

HIS LESSONS ABOUT FAILURE

The realism of Solomon's troubles and failures may be one of his most important contributions to us. Through Solomon's foolishness we see that collecting all of the wisdom in the world does not change our human nature. We all live not only below God's standards, but far below our own expectations as well. Who among us does not wish to be more loving, more self-

controlled, and more focused on what is really important? As followers of Christ, we long to show more of Him in us.

Yet that's the very reason we need Solomon. His failure to live up to the wisdom God gave him is a reminder that even being the wisest person in the world doesn't necessarily protect you from yourself.

That's why it's so important to think about what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote that Jesus became the wisdom of God for us (1 Cor. 1:30). What did Paul mean when he said that Jesus became wisdom for us?

First, Jesus did for us what Solomon could not do. Although an often foolish Solomon could recognize and collect wisdom, Jesus personified wisdom in everything He did.

Solomon suffered and died for his own wrongs,

but Jesus suffered and died for our sins—and then offered His own name and relationship with God as a gift to us.

In the process, Jesus became the practical means by which we can use knowledge to come to Him, and—in Him—to find ultimate safety, significance, and satisfaction.

THE WISDOM OF MULTIPLE COUNSEL

Long ago, Solomon wrote, “Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety” (Prov. 11:14).

Could this ancient proverb offer wisdom not only for people who are hurting but also for the family members and pastors who are called upon to help them?

*“Where there is
no counsel, the
people fall; but
in the multitude
of counselors
there is safety.”*
(Prov. 11:14)

THE CHALLENGES OF REAL LIFE

So many of us have family members and close friends who are living with the pain and confusion of addictions, Alzheimer's, autism, clinical depression, marital abuse, or life-threatening eating disorders. We can only imagine how many others are struggling with posttraumatic stress, gender confusion, panic attacks, schizophrenia, or obsessive-compulsive disorders.

These are only a few of the sorrows that need the

wisdom of Solomon and the Spirit of the One who said He came into the world not to condemn, but to rescue (Jn. 3:17; 12:47).

THE ADDITIONAL PAIN OF CRITICISM

It's important for us to think together about how we respond to those who are struggling with issues of emotional and mental health. If we are not careful, we can unintentionally add to their pain by suggesting that their struggle reflects a lack of faith, prayer, or time in the Word of God—unless there is an underlying organic or physical cause.

By what wisdom can we determine whether there are physical factors at work? How many of us understand the intimate connection between body and soul when it comes to trauma and memories that sear the soul like a hot iron? How many of us have the insight

or time to deal with those whose hearts and minds have been devastated by pornography, sexual abuse or rape, the front lines of war, or a long history of domestic violence?

THE PRESSURES OF FAITH

When pastors are called upon in such crises, they can feel overwhelmed. Many of them realize their limitations, but they feel compelled by their congregations or other leaders to act as if the Bible, prayer, and fellowship are the only God-honoring ways to deal with emotional and mental problems.

The tension between what we think of as biblical solutions and secular resources are understandable. As followers of Christ, we don't want to make the mistake of treating a spiritual condition as a physical or mental illness. Nor should we treat

a physical or mental illness as a spiritual condition.

IN PURSUIT OF ANSWERS

Together we agree that our dependency needs to be on God alone. But within what boundaries does the God of the Bible provide for His people? Don't we thank Him every day for our daily bread even though it comes to us through the efforts of farmers, manufacturers, and retailers, many of whom never darken the door of a church?

In a similar way, haven't many of us also thanked God for the help of health professionals and social workers who have walked with us through medical problems, mental illness, addictions, and the trauma of war, rape, or poverty?

If our intent is to find help that reflects the wisdom of God, what do we lose if we ask a doctor to look for

organic factors that might be clouding our minds? Or what part of our faith suffers if we ask professional specialists to help us explore our thoughts, emotions, and choices?

No pastor, troubled individual, or family should have to bear alone the weight of spiritual problems complicated by the possibility of real mental, emotional, and physical illness. Nor can we safely assume that our desire to trust God needs to be kept separate from the combined counsel of pastoral and health professionals.

THE NEED FOR PERSPECTIVE

No counselor, doctor, or support group can ever replace our individual accountability to God. Nor can medical or professional counseling ever replace the need for pastoral and congregational care.

None of us can afford to walk away from the people who are praying for us, teaching us the Word of God, and encouraging us to remain dependent on our Lord. We would be better off dying early, diseased in body and troubled in soul, than to live long, peaceful, and healthy lives without a daily awareness of our reliance on Christ.

But, if through the safety of many counselors, God gives even more wisdom—how can we, to the praise of Christ, insist on less?

In summary, Christ, the King of creation, is the Lord of all truth. He gives us pastors who open the Bible to remind us that the God of creation provides for His people through countless men and women, whether they know Him or not.

Yes, there are dangers. It has always been possible to get bad advice that does not reflect the wisdom or

words of God. In the time of King David, a man the king counted on for spiritual insight ended up betraying him and giving terrible counsel to David's rebellious son (2 Sam. 16:20-23).

Along the way, any doctor, counselor, or spiritual leader might unintentionally mislead us. Yet that's why we need to pay special attention to the wisdom of Solomon. It is because bad advice can come from some of our most trusted sources that we need to hear the Word of God when it encourages us to weigh multiple perspectives to sort through difficult problems. "Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety" (Prov. 11:14).

When we are over our head in trouble, some would want us to trust God

and God alone (Prov. 3:5-6). But the truth is that God Himself advises us to trust Him as we weigh the advice of multiple counselors.

THE DIFFERENT KINDS OF WISDOM

According to Buddhist folklore, two traveling monks reached a river where they met a young woman. Wary of the current, she asked if they could carry her across. One of the monks hesitated, but the other quickly picked her up onto his shoulders, transported her across the water, and put her down on the other bank. She thanked him and departed. As the monks continued on their way, the one was brooding and preoccupied. Unable to hold his silence, he spoke out. "Brother, our spiritual training teaches us

to avoid any contact with women, but you picked that one up on your shoulders and carried her!” “Brother,” the second monk replied, “I set her down on the other side. But you are still carrying her.”

A QUESTION OF WISDOM

The insight of the second monk raises an interesting question for followers of Christ. If we acknowledge examples of moral and spiritual insight in another religion, do we weaken our case for the distinctiveness of our own faith?

I ask the question because I believe we actually strengthen our case by seeing that one of the things the Bible does is help us to see wisdom outside of its own pages. By being our inspired standard for wisdom, the Bible shows how to recognize (1) natural, (2) religious, and (3) moral

insights in the world around us. Most important, the Bible shows us how these first three kinds of wisdom can help us to see our need for (4) the redemptive wisdom of the cross.

Let's take a closer look at how the first three kinds of wisdom can help us build bridges to those outside our faith, without compromising the distinctiveness of Christ in the process.

NATURAL WISDOM

The Old Testament book of Proverbs gives us examples of practical insights that abound in the cultures and religions of the world. Solomon's wisdom shows us how to learn from the animals, from agriculture, and from personal reflection on how life works. Many of his wise sayings illustrate the value of a natural wisdom that can be found as we observe the world

around us. For example:

- Wise is the one who is not too big to learn from the ant (Prov. 6:6-8).
- The most important battles are fought in the mind (Prov. 16:32; 25:28).

A benefit of such natural wisdom is that it can help anyone live a more thoughtful life. A downside is that natural wisdom does not by itself give us hope in a world where all of our accomplishments are subject to change and loss (Eccl. 1:1-11).

RELIGIOUS WISDOM

People of many cultures have found it difficult to think that the wonders of the natural world have no counterpart on the other side of death. As a result, many religions have tried to give their followers hope beyond the grave. While the following statements are from the wisdom of the

Bible, they have parallels in other religious systems:

- Those who hope only in this life are destined for despair (Eccl. 2:15-20).
- Nothing is more relevant than the eternal (Eccl. 12:13-14).

By believing in life after death, people of many religions have found courage to make sacrifices for a better world beyond. But eternal perspectives have also been a problem. By minimizing the importance of this life, many have wasted the earth's resources, waged unnecessary wars, and sacrificed their lives at the expense of others. Religious wisdom does not make people good merely by offering the hope of immortality.

MORAL WISDOM

From Moses to Jesus, the Scriptures show that spirituality without morality can result in everything from

false gods to religious exploitation of the poor. According to the Bible, moral wisdom is so important that our Creator wrote His laws not only in stone but also in our hearts (Rom. 2:14-15). The result is that the Bible resonates with a universal human conscience when it says things like, “Do to others what you would have them do to you” (Mt. 7:12 NIV) and “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21).

Once again, however, we are faced with an insight that is incomplete. When we think about the moral wisdom of love, our problem is not so much in knowing but in doing. No matter how much we want to love, we easily slide into self-centered thinking that causes us to hurt and be hurt. None of us can give or receive as much love as our heart longs for.

REDEMPTIVE WISDOM

Because we are all wounded people, we need more than natural, religious, and moral wisdom to do the right thing. We need a redemptive insight to help us deal with the wrongs we have done to others and that others have done to us.

This was the kind of wisdom Jesus offered when He stepped into our broken world and said, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28) and “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (Mk. 2:17).

Christ’s invitation to hurting and helpless people was not new. For centuries, Jewish prophets had been declaring that the most high God lives not only in the

heavens but also in the dark valleys of crushed and shattered people who recognize their desperate need of Him (Ps. 34:18; Isa. 57:15).

What was new with Christ was that at the crossroads of the world, and on the center page of human history, God unveiled the secret of His redemptive wisdom. By an act of immeasurable love, our Creator became our substitute, dying in our place for our sin (1 Cor. 1:17-31).

Wisdom doesn't get more profound than this. The darkest, most tragic moment of human history became the means by which our Creator could offer us the light of His Spirit, His forgiveness, and His everlasting life.

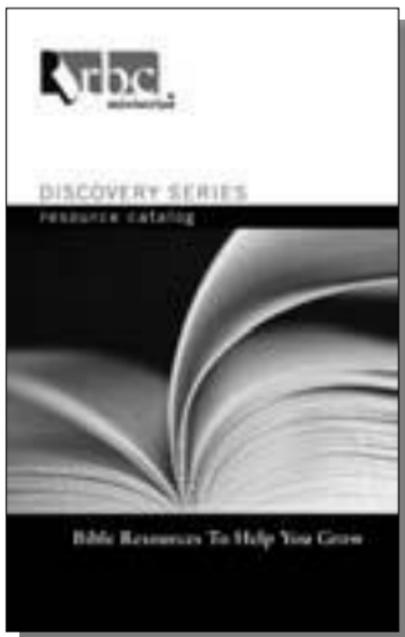
By the redemptive wisdom of Christ, wasted, ruined, and hopeless people learn to love as they have

been loved, to forgive as they have been forgiven, and to salvage as they have been salvaged.

Seeing Jesus as the fulfillment of God's gift of wisdom to us (1 Cor. 1:30), we can read Solomon's love for wisdom with even more appreciation. Now we can do more than celebrate the value of practical insight. We can see the source of all wisdom when Solomon said, "Joyful is the person who finds wisdom For wisdom is more profitable than silver, and her wages are better than gold. Wisdom is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her" (Prov. 3:13-15 NLT).

This booklet was adapted from Mart De Haan's monthly *Been Thinking About* articles. An archive of these articles can be found at http://www.rbc.org/been_thinking_about/home.aspx

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