

GET WISDOM!

I. “The Most Important Thing in the World to Know”

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I Kings 3:4-15; 4:29-34

Proverbs 1:1-7

TEXT: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge* [wisdom] Prov. 1:7a

INTRODUCTION

Use your imagination for a moment and suppose that an angel came to you with a special message from God saying that He was quite pleased with you and wanted to grant you one request, whatever you asked for. What would you ask for? I expect money might come to mind—think of all the good you could do if you were the richest man in the world? But then, perhaps power is what we’d ask for—think of what you could do for good if you were in control of the world. Of course, money and power can’t provide us with healthy, energetic, vibrant bodies, so maybe we’d ask for perfect health and strength without measure.

Well, our Scripture this morning is about a man who was given this opportunity— to ask God for anything he desired with the promise it would be granted. While certainly there are lots of legends of genies and fairytales of such opportunities, as far as we know, this is the only man in history that was actually given this chance by God. Turn with me to 1 Kings 3:4-15, pg. 326 in your pew Bibles.

KING SOLOMON

Solomon is Israel’s third king— there was Saul, David, and then David’s son Solomon. Don’t you like the humility of Solomon’s response to God’s offer from God to give him anything he wanted? 1 Kings 3:7 & 9

Now, O LORD 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.... 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 great people of yours?

Solomon came to the throne at about age 20, so he was not literally “only a little child.” But that phrase reflects how overwhelmed he felt at the responsibilities before him and his dependence upon God for help.

Then, following a famous example of Solomon’s wisdom, at the end of chapter 4, we have this summary statement of how abundantly God answered Solomon’s request for wisdom. Let’s look at that now in 1 Kings 4:29-34.....

Note that Solomon is not only a great writer of proverbs, but he is an impressive musician with 1005 songs. He was also a botanist and a zoologist.

In giving us wisdom, God can also use human agents. Polly has been lobbying for this little theory to be included. It goes like this: “Why was Solomon so wise? ... Because he had so many wives to advise him!” He did end up with 700 wives plus 300 concubines (or porcupines as little kids have known to say). However, to set the record straight, let me quote from what the Bible says about this, *and his wives led him astray* (1 Kings 11:3b).

Solomon’s wisdom is best known, encapsulated in proverbs. While we don’t have all 3,000 of his proverbs, we have an impressive collection in the Book of Proverbs. Most of them are attributed to Solomon, though not all of them are. Wisdom is the theme threaded through this book, with the word occurring 41 times. For the rest of the summer, I’m planning for us to feast on some of this Godly wisdom presented here.

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

Proverbs is certainly one of the most practical, down-to-earth books in the Bible. It gives us wisdom in raising our children, handling money, work, not being lazy, gluttony, gossip, sex, concern for the poor, and much more. We certainly need the wisdom of Proverbs today.

We live in a day where knowledge is exploding exponentially. I don’t even know what the current statistics are, but not long ago they were saying our entire body of human knowledge was doubling every couple of years. I can’t even imagine that. Did you know that a peasant in tenth century Europe was exposed to roughly the same volume of information over his entire lifetime as is in one daily edition of the New York Times? I don’t have any idea how they come up with such conclusions, but I think all of us feel overwhelmed and inundated by information. We’re getting run over on the information superhighway.

While we may know far more about our world than our ancestors even dreamed of, are we wiser? Wisdom, you see, has to do with insight, understanding the inner qualities and relationships of things— good judgment and good sense. True wisdom is not an accumulation of facts and information, it involves being able to apply that information toward living well. Over a century ago, Henry David Thoreau warned we had, “Improved means to unimproved ends!”

Wisdom has to do with common sense. Have you noticed how warning labels on products have been multiplying? When you read them, it really makes you wonder about how stupid people can be. Here’s just a few.

- On a Duraflame fireplace log: “Caution— risk of fire.”
- On a Batman costume: “Warning: cape does not enable user to fly.”
- On a bottle of hair coloring: “Do not use as an ice cream topping.”
- On a cardboard sun shield for a car: “Caution: “Do not drive with sun shield in place.”
- On a portable stroller: “Caution: Remove infant before folding for storage.”

It makes you wonder, doesn’t it?

While the Book of Proverbs is all about wisdom, we must start at the beginning. The root of all wisdom is, as my title says, the most important thing in the world to know. What is that? Listen for it as we read Proverbs 1:1-7 (page 616 in your pew Bible).

THE FEAR-OF-THE-LORD

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge [wisdom] (Prov. 1:7a).

The term, “fear of the Lord” occurs 21 times in Proverbs’ 31 chapters– woven through the entire book. Prov. 9:10 gives a little fuller expression in:

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

So, wisdom rests solidly on “the fear of the LORD.” Just what does the Bible mean by this strange-sounding (to our ears) term?

First of all, the Biblical concept is more than just adding up the meanings of fear + of + the + LORD. My brother, in his book, Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places, hyphenates the term to indicate that it is unique in its meaning– “fear-of-the-LORD.” The meaning is more than the sum of its parts. He says fear-of-the-LORD is the stock biblical phrase for the way we are to live, act, and speak about this spiritual life.

Last fall, I was in Yakima for a presbytery committee meeting, and because of the early time of the meeting, I’d had to come down the night before. I was having breakfast by myself in a restaurant, and overheard three truckers in discussion about 4 booths away. They were talking about brakes, and that Arco had raised the fees to \$0.40 on debit card transactions (which I was thankful to know). Then one of them said, “Now here’s something I don’t understand. You can take two gases, hydrogen and oxygen, both highly explosive, and put them together and you get water!” (Well, I was glad to know he’d passed his hazardous materials test.) But, as they pondered this great mystery, it made me think, yes indeed there is mystery here. I spent three years majoring in chemistry in college, so I knew the scientific “explanation” of atoms combining to form H₂O– but the result is something you would never expect just studying hydrogen and oxygen. Knowing all about hydrogen and all about oxygen doesn’t give you a clue as to what results from two atoms of hydrogen attaching to one atom of oxygen.

Fear-of-the-LORD is like that. It is more than the sum of its parts. It is not fear as we are accustomed to think of fear. Fear-of-the-LORD is something more like living in reverential awe of God’s sovereignty, goodness, and mercy while in obedient relationship with Him. I’m sure you’ve noticed how people respond to a newborn baby. When I visit new parents in the hospital shortly after a birth, I feel like I’m walking into almost palpable wonder and awe. There is a stillness at the mystery, the sacredness of this God-given life. And it is not just the parents that feel that way. Other visitors sense it too. There is a quiet hush in the room. This is maybe a glimpse of what fear-of-the-LORD means in relationship to God. We are beholding something way beyond us and our ability to comprehend– “lost in wonder, love and praise,” to quote Charles Wesley’s hymn.

That is where true wisdom begins. While *the LORD gives wisdom* (Prov. 2:6), it is given to those who know the fear-of-the-LORD. You hear it in Solomon’s prayer and humility. But fear-of-the-LORD is not just something we have or don’t have. It can be cultivated and developed in our practice. Let’s consider how we can do this.

DEVELOPING FEAR-OF-THE-LORD

We live in a day when almost everyone seems overly comfortable with God. People easily talk about God and feel they are okay with Him. He is referred to as “The Big Guy,” or “The Man Upstairs.” The holiness spoken of in the Bible no longer causes pause. Whatever our sins are, whatever our behavior, we’ve convinced ourselves that this God-as-we-understand him, will at the end say, “It’s okay. I know you tried to do pretty well.” And, even among Christians, there is often a flippancy about God and not a lot of what we might refer to as reverence in the worship of God and obedience to His teachings. We’ve placed ourselves at the center, and perceive that God is there to meet our needs.

Because of this, I believe we need to actually work at cultivating this fear-of-the-LORD in our hearts. The way we do this is through prayer, God’s Word, and worship. In each of these, I’m not talking perfunctory performance of duty, but keeping at it until our inner beings are being molded and shaped by the experience. As we pray, we’re putting faith in action— letting go of our agendas and seeking to understand God’s will, yes, seeking wisdom. In God’s Word, we let it form us and conform us to the image of God. We stand in reverent awe at the words telling us about God and His fullest revelation in Jesus Christ. As we worship with God’s people, we come with a spirit of humility to exalt God together. All these are means of moving toward living in reverential awe of God’s sovereignty, goodness, and mercy while in obedient relationship with Him— the fear-of-the-LORD.

I read an example of putting this into practice the other day I’d like to share in closing. The great 19th century American evangelist, D. L. Moody received an invitation to come to England and hold evangelistic meetings from three Christian men in Liverpool. They promised to pay all his travel expenses. June 17, 1873, Moody and his new, inexperienced song leader, Ira Sankey arrived in Liverpool with their families. Moody had exhausted all his funds buying the steamship tickets. When they arrived, Moody found out two of the men had died and the third one had forgotten his promise and had no inclination to help them. No arrangements had been made, no meetings planned. Here they were, stranded. Moody said to Sankey, “God seems to have closed the doors. We’ll not open any ourselves. If He opens the door, we’ll go in. If He doesn’t, we’ll return to America.”

Right there, don’t you see the fear-of-the-LORD? Moody was capable at this stage of his life of putting something together. But, there was that respect for the Lord’s ways, timing, and a humility in not moving out-of-step with Him.

That night, in their hotel, Moody “happened” to remember another invitation he’d received to England some time earlier from a young chemist, George Bennett, in York who was the founder and secretary of the YMCA there. When he had received that invitation, he’d told Sankey, “This door is only ajar.” Again, can’t you see that respect for God’s plans in not wanting to push? Well, now knowing nowhere else to turn, Moody sent a telegram to Bennett saying: “Moody here— are you ready for him?”

Of course, Bennett was totally surprised since he’d never received a firm reply to his earlier

invitation. He replied to Moody, "Please fix date when you can come to York." Moody replied immediately, "I will be in York tonight at ten o'clock." A dazed Bennett met Moody at the train station and they quickly began planning. This was Friday night and Moody thought they should commence meetings Sunday in local churches.

At first the meetings were only moderately successful. But one of the pastors was F. B. Meyer. The encounter with Moody was life-changing for Meyer. They began praying together many hours in the small vestry room of Meyer's church, kneeling together at the leather-covered table in the center of the room. Moody later referred to that little room as "the foundation from which the river of blessing for all England had sprung." During the next two years, two and a half million people heard Moody preach throughout England. It was the greatest British revival since the days of John Wesley.

Again, the fear-of-the-LORD will be seen in prayer. It is on our knees we wrestle through to the place of letting God be God and surrendering ourselves to simply being His instruments, whatever that may be. Indeed,

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding* (Prov. 9:10).

In the coming weeks in Proverbs, I hope we come to a fuller understanding of this wisdom that flows from getting our relationship with God put in right order.