

Jesus in the Wisdom Literature

Wisdom We Can Use

Last week I was interviewed by a pastor for a dissertation he's writing on preaching and he asked me a question no one has ever asked me before. Did I have any regrets about my preaching? The first thing that came to mind were those times I've hurt or confused people because I wasn't as careful or as precise as I should have been in what I said; but then I told him that my greatest regret is how long it has taken me to learn that Jesus is the hero of the Bible. For many years, I taught the Scriptures as if the Bible was about us. If I taught the story of David and Goliath, I would talk about how we should be more like David – or like Noah or like Abraham or like Paul. I taught the Bible as if it were a book of virtues to emulate. But the Bible isn't a book of disconnected stories about virtuous people; it's a single story about how God rescues us and creation from evil and death by sending His Son to do for us what we could not do for ourselves; and by making the Bible a story about us rather than about Jesus, I wasn't teaching the gospel at all. I was teaching religious moralism; that the Christian life is doing stuff for God; and so most of my sermons left people feeling like, "More stuff for me to do – more things I am failing in – more lessons for me to remember. Whoopee, I love coming to church!" Jesus taught that the whole Bible is about Him and the story of redemption; and so when we read the bible or hear the bible taught, we shouldn't come away thinking, "Aren't I great – or why am I such a jerk?" but instead, "Isn't Christ great?" After all, spiritual growth is being more and more conformed to the image of Jesus, not to the image of David or Abraham or some other character in the Bible. That's why we're doing this series on Jesus in the Old Testament. So far we've looked what the historical books of the Old Testament – from Genesis through 2 Kings – tell us about Jesus and this morning we're going to talk about what the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament – the books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon - tell us about Jesus and I want to start with what Jesus Himself said about the topic.

Let's look at Matthew 12:42. Even though Jesus is performing miracles which people are flocking to watch, most are not really listening to what He has to say; and so Jesus gives them this warning. *"The Queen of the South will rise up with this generation at the judgment and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here."* Jesus warns His own generation that at the final judgment, the Queen of Sheba who along with many other wise people from around the world journeyed to Jerusalem to hear the wisdom of Solomon, the wisest man of his age, will condemn the people of Jesus' generation for not taking advantage of their opportunity to hear the wisdom of the greater Solomon, Jesus Himself. One thing we've seen as we've made our way through the Old Testament is how Jesus is foreshadowed by many of His ancestors. Just as David foreshadows Jesus as the king God's people need, David's son, Solomon foreshadows Jesus as the wisdom God's people need. When David died and Solomon became king of Israel, God appeared to him in a dream to ask what he wanted God to give to him. Look Solomon's answer in 1 Kings 3:6-14 *"Then Solomon said, "You have shown great lovingkindness to Your servant David my father, according as he walked before You in truth and righteousness and uprightness of heart toward You; and You have reserved for him this great lovingkindness, that You have given him a son to sit on his throne, as {it is} this day. Now, O LORD my God, You have made Your servant king in place of my father David, yet I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in (which is an idiom meaning I don't know how to lead God's people.) Your servant is in the midst of Your people which You have chosen, a great people who are too many to be numbered or counted. So give Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people to discern between good and evil. For*

who is able to judge this great people of Yours?" Solomon could have asked God for anything - military might, riches, the death of his enemies - but he asks for the wisdom he will need to be the king Israel needs. *"It was pleasing in the sight of the Lord that Solomon had asked this thing. God said to him, "Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for yourself long life, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have you asked for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself discernment to understand justice, behold, I have done according to your words. Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you. I have also given you what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that there will not be any among the kings like you all your days. If you walk in My ways, keeping My statutes and commandments, as your father David walked, then I will prolong your days."* In the story of the Bible, Israel enjoyed its best days under King Solomon; and his reign foreshadows the coming kingdom of God when the king Israel really needs will reign over a restored and blessed earth. Solomon is a picture of the great wisdom of the coming king of the world and the blessing of His people as a result of that wisdom. Israel ruled over more territory, was richer and more prosperous, more respected by the surrounding nations, healthier and more blest during the reign of Solomon than at any other time in her history. In fact, she never again regained the prominence as a nation which she enjoyed during Solomon's reign. Solomon was world-renown for his wisdom and wise people from all over the world including the queen of Sheba came to Solomon for council and advice just as the prophets say that people from all over the world will come to the Messiah when He reigns for His wisdom and guidance. So Solomon is a picture of the wisdom of Christ and the great blessings which come to all who listen to that wisdom.

The Hebrew word for wisdom means "skill in living." When the Bible talks about wisdom, it isn't talking about the wisdom of the temple or the wisdom of the university; it's speaking about the wisdom of everyday life. Wisdom in the Bible addresses the practical issues of life; making wise and skillful choices in marriage, family, business, friendships, finances, reputation and health; responding to God in every decision, living in harmony with Him and with His creation. Solomon is the great example in the Bible of applying the wisdom that comes from God for our blessing to everyday life and most of the wisdom literature is written by Solomon. This morning I want to look at three things we learn about Jesus from the Wisdom literature of the Bible. 1. The profit of wisdom from Solomon's book of Proverbs. 2. The limitations of wisdom from the books of Ecclesiastes and Job. 3. The wisdom we can use which we find in the greater Solomon, Jesus.

Let's look at the profit of wisdom in Solomon's book of Proverbs. According to Proverbs, success and happiness aren't a result of fate or luck, but a result of making wise decisions. The quality of our life is largely determined by the decisions that we make. Proverbs is a collection of short, memorable sayings about life. Some were written by Solomon, and some were collected from other sources of ancient wisdom by Solomon and others. All tell us how to live successfully in this world. Now it's important to understand that Proverbs are not rigid rules. They simply tell us how life works most of the time. For example, *Prov. 28:19 says, "He who tills his land will have plenty of food, but he who follows empty pursuits will have poverty in plenty."* Obviously there are exceptions. The land of a hard-working farmer may not yield plenty during a drought and lazy people occasionally get lucky and win the lottery. But most of the time, people who are hard-working and diligent are rewarded while people who are lazy and undisciplined go without. Now you can bet your life on what's true 99% of time or you can bet your life on what happens 1% of time - it's up to you. But the Proverbs reveal the way life works most of the time. That's why Solomon talks a lot from his own personal experience about the great profit which comes to those who discover wisdom. *"Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding! Do not forget nor turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will guard you; Love her, and she will watch over you. The beginning of wisdom {is:} Acquire wisdom; And with all your acquiring, get understanding. Prize her, and she will exalt you; She will honor you if you embrace her. She will place on your head a garland of grace; She will present you with a crown of beauty."* (Proverbs 4:5-9) Over and over, Proverbs promises us everything we want in life if we will make finding wisdom our chief goal in life; because happiness and success are not the result of luck but of making wise decisions and living skillfully in this world. And Solomon equates wisdom with righteousness. The wise life is the righteous life; living in right relationship with God, people and the rest of the creation. That's the difference between being

wise and simply being clever; between the wisdom which comes from God and the wisdom which comes from this world; and why true wisdom comes from God. Look at Proverbs 1:7. Solomon writes, *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;"* He repeats himself in Proverbs 9:10 *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."* This is the theme of the whole book of Proverbs; wisdom begins with a right relationship with God. I'll never become wise until I make knowing Him and then responding to what I know about Him my first consideration in every area of life. If I want a successful marriage and family, I have to begin with God. If I want to live a life of influence and significance, I have to begin with God. If I want to live a happy life, I have to begin with God because smart people take God seriously. Proverbs 15:33 *"The fear of the LORD is the instruction for wisdom, And before honor comes humility."* Where do I find wisdom - in the fear of the Lord - which means that wisdom only begins once I humble myself and to admit that I'm not God. Proverbs 14:2 *"He who walks in his uprightness fears the Lord, but he who is devious in his ways despises Him."* How I live is the most accurate indicator of what I really think about God. The righteous lives the way he lives because he fears God. The unrighteous lives the way he lives because he despises God. Wisdom begins with taking God seriously.

Years ago, I began reading one chapter of Proverbs each day. There are 31 chapters so if today is July 24th, I'd read the 24th proverb. And the more I read, the more I began to see themes in this collection. Most of the proverbs stand alone but you can find all the proverbs about certain subjects; so you can get God's perspective on that area of life and what wise living looks like. When I was struggling with lust, I collected and memorized all the proverbs on the dangers of immorality and as a result, I discovered more motivation to use the power God had given me to live pure life than I had found in all the modern books I had read about how to control myself. When I struggled with procrastination and passivity, I collected all the proverbs on diligence and industriousness and memorized and studied them; and again, my life was changed more deeply than from reading all the books I'd read about time-management and personal productivity. Proverbs does make you wise because when God changes us, He begins by changing the way we think. We behave the way we behave because we think the way we think; and so as long as I believe a lie, I'll never be able to behave the way I need to behave to have the life I want to have. I used to think the Christian life was God leading me by telling me what to do in every situation but Proverbs helped me to see that God has already told me what to do and that wisdom is simply taking what He has already told me seriously and acting upon it. God hasn't called us to be mindless drones or puppets whose strings He pulls. He has given us a mind and the more of His wisdom we pour into that mind and act upon, the better life works. That's the point of Proverbs.

If Proverbs shows us the profit of wisdom, Job and Ecclesiastes show us its limitations and remind us why we need Jesus. Wisdom makes sense of this world but Job and Ecclesiastes rebukes the arrogance of those who think they understand the way everything works. Job is one of the most ancient books of the Old Testament and it discusses the mystery of suffering. Job is the object of a wager between God and the devil: God claims that Job serves Him out of love; the devil claims that Job serves God out of self-interest; and so God allows the devil to afflict Job, destroying his family, his wealth and his health to see if Job will continue to trust God or turn away from Him. But that's just the barebones of Job. The real story is about the mystery of why good people suffer and how we handle not understanding why we go through what we go through. Most of the book centers on conversations between Job and three of his friends, and later with another young man who also tries to instruct Job. Each tries to explain to Job why he's suffering and each speaks out of the wisdom of the Middle East, similar to what we find in Proverbs. Each says that Job suffers because he must have done something wrong and if he will repent, God will restore him. But the reader knows that while there is a measure of truth in everything they say, it's not true in Job's case and so Job keeps protesting that he's innocent and how he wishes that God would explain what He's doing and why He's doing it. Finally, God appears to instruct Job but God never explains the reason for Job's suffering; He just asks Job if he knows what God knows; and since he obviously doesn't, can he trust God without knowing? In the end, Job discovers that he doesn't need answers; all he really needs is God and that the experience of God Himself is superior to any wisdom he might have received. As Job says in Job 42:5, *"I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees You."* By the way, God wins His wager with the devil: in spite of everything, Job never curses God and in the end, God restores everything and more which the devil took from Job. The point of Job is that there are questions which human wisdom is incapable of answering because we cannot see the whole picture; and that faith alone sustains us when wisdom fails. Now the book of Ecclesiastes was also written by Solomon and it also demonstrates the limitations of wisdom - something Solomon discovered

in his own experience. Ecclesiastes is the counterpoint to Proverbs. Proverbs shows us how life normally works. It shows us the rule. But Ecclesiastes focuses on the exception. Proverbs shows us which way to go. But Ecclesiastes questions whether we can know the way. Proverbs makes sense of the world, Ecclesiastes questions whether the world can make sense. For this reason, much of Ecclesiastes is dark and pessimistic. It's a book about disillusionment and disappointment; about how the things we hope will satisfy us never do; about how the people we love often leave us or die; and about how the work we devote so much of ourselves to really doesn't accomplish anything in the end. Ecclesiastes isn't a book of answers but of questions because it looks at life as it appears under the sun; at how life looks from a purely secular perspective which doesn't take God into consideration; and I believe that Solomon is writing out of his own experience. Solomon begins well. He is Israel's wisest king and the wisdom he receives from God makes Israel a powerful and prosperous nation. His reign is the golden age of Israel. The problem is, even though Solomon is wise, he can't live according to his own wisdom. He discovers that knowing the wise thing to do and doing it are two entirely different things. He begins to marry foreign wives to cement Israel's relationship with her allies as well as accumulating a vast harem of concubines. Solomon loves the ladies; and his wives and his concubines steal his heart away from the Lord. *"He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart away. For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord, his God, as the heart of David, his father had been."* (2 Kings 11:3-4) Solomon begins going to church with his wives and worshipping their idols rather than the Lord. As a result, Camelot comes to an end. His kingdom begins to fall apart and begins a 400 year slide into idolatry, decline and exile. The wisest man of all time still could not defeat the weakness of his own flesh and eventually he destroys everything which his wisdom had built. Knowing the right thing to do is a lot different than doing the right thing; and the lesson of Solomon is that sin will destroy the best of us as well as the worst of us. The question the Old Testament leaves us with is how can Israel ever have the king she needs when even her wisest king became corrupt?

Which brings us to our third point: the wisdom we can actually use is found only in the greater Solomon: Jesus – because in Christ alone, not only do we find the wisdom we need but the strength and the will to follow that wisdom. Think about how those who heard Jesus say that He was greater than Solomon would react. Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived. Wise people – like the Queen of Sheba – came from all over the world to hear Solomon's wisdom and to see his accomplishments; yet Jesus says that He is greater than Solomon. He is wise king Israel needs. So how is Jesus the Greater Solomon? First, Jesus imparts a greater wisdom than Solomon. Both Solomon and Jesus received their wisdom from God and so the difference between the wisdom of Solomon and the wisdom of Jesus is not a difference of quality or truth; it is a difference of scope. Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God. God reveals through His Son things He didn't reveal through Solomon or through Moses or through the prophets. That's why Hebrews 1:1-2 says, *"God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son."* And why John writes in John 1:18, *"No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him."* Jesus is the final and full revelation of God. In the story of the Bible, God slowly reveals more and more about Himself until He becomes a human to fully reveal Himself to us. That's why Jesus said, *"He who has seen Me has seen the Father."* (John 14:9) Jesus imparts wisdom which no one else has access. God revealed through Solomon how people can live successfully in this world. God revealed through Jesus how people can live forever. God revealed through Solomon how to avoid suffering in this world. God revealed through Jesus how to embrace suffering as necessary for the accomplishment of God's will. God revealed through Solomon how to accumulate treasures on earth. God revealed through Jesus how to accumulate treasures in heaven. God revealed through Solomon the ABCs of walking with Him. God revealed through Jesus the A-Z of walking with Him. So Jesus is the greater Solomon because He imparts greater wisdom. Second, Jesus is the greater Solomon because He embodies the wisdom He imparts. That was Solomon's problem. He couldn't apply the wisdom He had to his own life. He knew the right thing to do but couldn't do it. But Jesus is history's wisest man because He lives in perfect consistency with the wisdom He reveals. All of the wisdom literature is fulfilled in Christ. All the wisdom literature simply describes how Jesus thought and behaved. He is wisdom personified. That's what Paul means in 1 Cor. 1:30 when he writes, *"But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption"* and again in Col. 2:3 when he writes, *"in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."* What is wisdom? Jesus. Where do we find wisdom? Jesus. He is the source of true wisdom and exemplifies that wisdom. Wisdom is living as He lived; and that brings us to the third

reason Jesus is the greater Solomon; He empowers us to apply that wisdom. All Solomon could do was to teach the wisdom God gave to him. He couldn't help anyone to actually live wisely. He couldn't even live wisely himself. But Jesus not only imparts and embodies a greater wisdom than Solomon; He empowers us to live wisely as well. He gives us His mind and His heart when He comes to live in us. Imagine having 24 hour access to Solomon the wisest man in the world. Any time you had a question or needed advice his door was always open. If you are a Christian, the greater Solomon – the smartest man in history – now lives in you and you have 24 hour access to Him.

So what does that mean for us practically? Paul tells us in Eph. 4:17-24 how to apply the wisdom Jesus gives to us. *"So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness."* Throughout Ephesians, Paul keeps reminding the Christians of Ephesus that they are no longer the people they used to be so they no longer have to live the way they used to live; the way the pagan culture around them still lives. Why do the Gentiles live the way they live – because they think the way they think – in the futility of their mind, darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life and wisdom of God because of their ignorance; and because they are excluded from God's wisdom, they behave the way they behave. *"But you did not learn Christ in this way, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus."* The first Christians were called disciples – literally "learners" and that is why Paul reminds the Ephesians about what they have learned from Jesus about how to live is the opposite of the way they used to live in their ignorance of God. A Christian is someone learning to live as Jesus lived; getting to know Jesus better and better, trusting Him more and more and following Him closer and closer – because Jesus is the wisest of all men and the truth about everything is found only in Him. So how do we do that? Well, in vs. 22-24, Paul gives us three essential steps for accessing the wisdom God has given us in Christ. Step one: repentance. What do I need to stop doing? The wisdom which God gives us through Jesus won't change our life until we see specifically where we need to change. Look at vs. 22, *"that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit,"* I no longer need to live the way I used to live because I'm no longer the person I used to be. That's why Paul talks about my old self and my new self in these verses. When Christ comes into our life, the person we used to be dies immediately and a new person is born. That's what it means to be born again; to be a new creation. But while the old self is gone, all of his habits stay with me because I still live in my old self's mind and body. I'm a new creation living in an old body and so I am still in danger of being corrupted by what Paul calls "the lusts of deceit" which live in my body. I will continue to live the way I used to live as long as I continue to think the way I used to think – which is why I need to learn from Jesus. That's Paul's point; the Ephesians no longer need to live in the lusts of deceit because God gave them all the truth and wisdom they would ever need when He gave them Jesus. They just need to learn from Jesus and that begins with identifying the lies and the habits they brought with them from the time before they knew Jesus and laying them aside. That's what repentance is: turning away from one thing and turning toward another and true faith always involves repentance. Any time I move from ignorance to knowledge, from deceit to truth and from unbelief to belief, there will be to be a corresponding change in my behavior. If there isn't, I'm just a hearer but not a believer or a doer. If I'm really good at holding a grudge but then I learn how much God has forgiven me because Christ died in my place, true faith and repentance means that I will lay aside my grudges and forgive others the way Jesus has forgiven me. If I'm a loner and guard my independence but then I learn that Jesus saved me to put me into His family and calls me to love my brothers and sisters the way He loves me, true faith and repentance means I will lay aside my independence and plan my time around serving others rather than serving myself. If I'm timid and fearful, but then learn from Jesus that He is always with me and will never leave me or forsake me, then true faith and repentance means that I will stop giving into my fears and step out in faith even when I'm scared. The point is, there is no faith without identifying the lies which faith exposes; no faith without laying aside the old man with his evil habits; no faith without repentance. I find that I grow by faith and repentance; and if I'm not aware of what I need to currently lay aside because of my faith in Christ, I'm probably not listening to Him. Step one. Repentance: What do I need to stop doing? Step two: Renewal: Why do I need to stop? Once I identify – as a result of learning from Jesus - what I need to lay aside, the second step in applying the wisdom God gives us in Christ is the renewal of my mind. Look at vs. 23. *"...and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind,"* We behave the way we behave because we think the way we think. To

change our behavior, we have to first change our thinking. That's why Paul emphasized that the pagans live the way they live because they think the way they think. As long as I believe a lie, as long as I live in the lusts of deceit, my behavior will follow suit. To act like Jesus, I need to think like Jesus, so renewing our mind is the way our life changes. For me to truly repent, I need to change the thinking that produces the behavior I need to lay aside. If I don't change my thinking, long-term repentance is impossible. I can't behave the way Jesus behaves until I think the way Jesus thinks. That's why I did the study on diligence and productivity in Proverbs to cure my habitual laziness and procrastination. I had to believe that diligence was desirable and precious before I would become diligent and that study in Proverbs renewed my mind and my perspective on personal productivity. In fact, every major change in my life since I became a disciple of Jesus has happened the same way. I became aware of some bad habit from my past; and as I set out to learn what the Bible said about that habit, I was gradually able to identify the lies which gave that habit power over me and as my thinking changed, my behavior changed. Or as Jesus says, the truth will set you free. Step one in applying Christ's wisdom to our life: repentance: What do I need to stop doing? Step two: renewal: Why do I need to stop? Step three: reset; what do I need to start doing instead. Look at vs. 24, *"...and put on the new self, which in {the likeness of} God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth."* Thomas Aquinas said that only a habit can overcome a habit. Growing as a Christian is replacing the bad habits of who we used to be with the new habits of who we are as new creations. We are new people from the moment Christ comes into our life but we spend a lifetime learning how to live as new people. That's what Paul means when he tells the Ephesians to put on the new self who has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. You are already a new person because Christ lives in you. Spiritual growth isn't becoming something different but becoming who you really are as you daily learn wisdom from Jesus. Let's say, you're reading the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." Wise people are meek people. So what old habits do I need to lay aside? I'm not meek or patient. I'm easily frustrated when I don't get my way. I'm not slow to anger – just the opposite. And no amount of self-control has changed that. So I repent of my impatience and lack of meekness and it is renewal time; time to get Christ's mind in this area. And as I study passages about patience and anger and meekness, I realize that meekness is just trusting that God is good and He is in control and rather than fighting with Him to get my way, I will trust that He is wiser than I and submit. So how do I reset? Each time I begin to feel impatient or irritated or angry, I thank God that He is in control and that what is happening is meant for my benefit. It's tough at first because replacing an old habit with a new one takes work. But I find that the more consistently I remind myself of what is true, the more quickly those feelings of frustration and impatience go away, and pretty soon, thanking God that He is in control has become a habit; especially as that habit is reinforced by the blessings of the wisdom of meekness.

Every true Christian is a student of Jesus; and the more consistently we listen to Him and obey, the wiser and more skillful in life we become because Jesus is the greater Solomon, the smartest man who ever lived. There is nothing that I know more about than Jesus does and the smartest thing I can do is to go to Him for wisdom. We become Christians by faith and repentance; by believing that Jesus is God's Son and that He came to live the life we failed to live so that God can credit His righteousness to us as gift; dying the death we deserve to die, bearing the punishment we deserved on the cross so that God can pardon us and rising from the dead in our behalf so that we can live forever. And when we believe in Jesus, we repent of living a self-directed life and turn to Him for direction and guidance. We become Christians by faith and repentance and we grow as Christians the same way – by faith and repentance. We learn from Jesus, believe what He says, repent and apply – and are blessed as a result.

