

Living Messages of the Books of The Bible

GENESIS TO MALACHI

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THE book of Proverbs is essentially didactic, and consequently its content constitutes its message. There are certain peculiarities about the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. While it is true that the peculiarly Hebrew titles of God are found in them, yet all the references to the law and ritual, the sacrifices and ceremony with which the other Old Testament books abound, are absent from these.

While preeminently religious, they are yet primarily philosophic. They are the only three books of the wisdom literature of the Hebrew people in the Bible. The meaning of wisdom as applied to these writings is exactly what is intended to-day by the common use of the word philosophy. That common use is not strictly warranted by the real meaning of the word.

Philosophy does not mean wisdom, but the love of wisdom. A philosopher is not necessarily a wise man. He is a lover of wisdom - that is, one seeking after wisdom.

There is a distinct difference between the Hebrew philosophy revealed in these books and all others. It starts with an affirmation. They begin with a question. All philosophies other than that of the Hebrew people result from investigation in order to the answering of Pilate's question, **"What is truth?"**

I do not suggest that that is an improper method, but it must be recognized that the Hebrew philosophy begins by affirming God. Hebrew philosophers believed that there could be no discovery of ultimate truth save upon the basis of revelation, and the revelation with which they began was that of the existence of God.

The book of Proverbs is generally thought of as though it were merely a collection of wise sayings, lacking anything like system or order. As a matter of fact, there is no book in the Old Testament more systematic than this. A reference to our analysis of its content will demonstrate the accuracy of this assertion.

The first verse constitutes a title page, **"The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel."** The next six verses are occupied with the preface, in which the purpose of the book and the method of the writer are clearly stated. The preface ends with the fundamental affirmation of the Hebrew philosophy,

**"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge:
But fools despise wisdom and instruction."**

The book itself falls into three parts:

- First, a series of discourses in defense and application of the fundamental affirmation;
- Secondly, a series of proverbs collected and arranged by Solomon himself, and
- Lastly, a posthumous collection of Solomon's Proverbs, made by the men of Hezekiah's day.

All this is followed by an appendix containing the words of Agur and the oracles of Lemuel. In dealing with the permanent values of other books, we have been conscious of very much local color. In this book this is reduced almost to the vanishing point. It is a singularly living book. There are great passages of it which may be read in the heart of any of the great cities of to-day with perfect application to the existing conditions. Therefore, whereas in dealing with other books it has been necessary to search for the underlying principle, here that principle is plainly stated.

In other cases we have borrowed from other books some outstanding statement of principle, in order to see how the book under consideration illustrated that principle. In this case we find in the book itself both the statement of its permanent value, and the actual words of its living message. The two permanent values of the book, therefore, are its fundamental declaration and its argument of illustration.

The fundamental declaration is contained in the seventh verse of the first chapter. The presupposition and consequent deduction of this declaration constitute the deepest note in the Hebrew wisdom or philosophy. The presupposition is that God is all-wise; that in the final meaning of the word, wisdom can only be postulated of God. This conception is perpetually present in the arguments of Job, in the remarkable and contrastive method of the book of Ecclesiastes, and in the systematic order of the book of Proverbs. Moreover, it is taken for granted and constantly insisted upon that the wisdom of God expresses itself in all His works and in all His ways. The Hebrew philosophers believed that all natural phenomena constituted a revelation of the Divine Wisdom. Wherever they looked, at the land or the sea, at the earth or the heavens, they saw God. That philosophy on the human side accounted for the magnificent declaration with which the first book in the Bible opens: **“In the beginning God created.”** So they ever thought of wisdom as final in God.

From this fundamental conviction a clear and definite deduction was inevitable; if wisdom is perfect in God, wisdom in man consists in the fear of the Lord. A man is wise in the measure in which he apprehends and fears God. Fear in the sense in which it is certainly used in this fundamental declaration does not mean a cowardly, servile dread which strives to hide from God.

There are two kinds of fear possible in regard to God.

- There is the fear lest He should hurt me.
- There is the fear lest I should hurt Him.

The first is selfish, and produces no fruit of righteousness. The last is the fear of love, which produces holiness of character and righteousness of conduct. This fear of the Lord is emotional recognition of God. Do not let us be afraid of the word emotional. The emotional side of man's nature is as much a creation of God as is the intellectual. The emotional fear of God, then, is the answer of the soul in wonder in the presence of infinite Wisdom. That is preceded by intellectual apprehension of God, and consummated in volitional submission to His will. These Hebrew philosophers did not believe that by such intellectual apprehension, emotional exercise, and volitional submission, man achieved the ultimate Wisdom. The declaration is rather that in that fear, man comes into the condition for being wise.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

No man can begin to be wise until his life is in proper relation to the ultimate Wisdom. No man can become wise save as there is in him the fear of the Lord. It is a great word, mystical and philosophical. There is never anything mighty or practical that does not grow out of the mystical and philosophical. It is equally true that everything profoundly mystical and philosophical issues in that which is mighty and practical.

We now turn to the arguments in illustration.

Beginning with the eighth verse of the first chapter, all that remains of the book is of practical value and of present application as a permanent value and a present message. There is no single proverb in either of the two collections, the antithetical proverbs of the first, or the pictorial proverbs of the second, which has not a present value and a living message. For the purpose of this study we shall confine ourselves to the discourses of the first division of the book.

In these discourses the philosophy deals first with the child, then with the youth, and finally with the man. The whole world for the child is its home. The first movement outward is made in the finding of a friend, a companion. The boy finds his chum, the girl another girl to whom she can tell her secrets. Finally the youth passes out into the wonderland of the life of the city.

- The first circle is that of the home. There wisdom must be learned.
- The next circle is that of friendship, companionship formed outside the home. There wisdom must be applied.
- Finally there come **“the street . . . the broad places . . . the chief places of concourse . . . the entering in of the gates . . . the city.”**

In the midst of the rush, and hurry, and hurly-burly of life wisdom must be obeyed. The fundamental proposition is, **“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”** In these discourses that declaration is applied to practical life.

We begin in the home.

**“My son, hear the instruction of thy father,
And forsake not the law of thy mother:
For they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head,
And chains about thy neck.”**

That is a beautiful picture of wisdom - the fear of the Lord taught to children at home.

The subject of the responsibility of father and mother is not dealt with here, but it is taken for granted, and set upon the highest plane. The children are to hear the instruction of their father, and forsake not the law of their mother, in order that they may live in the fear of the Lord. Children are not able to grasp the thought of the Infinite. For them God is incarnate in father and mother. That is the meaning of fatherhood and motherhood. I say that with all care. God created man in His own image - male and female created He them. Both are needed to reveal God. Jesus expressed the fact of motherhood in God, when He said: **“How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings.”**

We need not be anxious to teach our children theology. Let us live in the fear of the Lord, and presently, by the ladder of their perfect confidence in us, they will climb to that apprehension of, and faith in God, which will be the rock of their strength to the end of time. Wisdom for children is contained in the instruction of father, and the law of mother.

The day must come when the child, in the realization of its own life, moves out into the wider circles of experience. The command to obey parents is not of force to the end of life.

There are two very distinct words in the Bible about the duty of children to parents.

- Obedience is for the days of childhood.
- Honor is forever.

There will come a day when the child has no longer to obey. It must begin to make its own choices, guided at first by parental council, but ultimately quite alone. When the child enters this second sphere, Wisdom is particularly careful to give instruction;-

**“My son, if sinners entice thee,
Consent thou not.”**

Then follows a list of friendships which are not to be made. The principles may thus be stated. Those who seek to enter into comradeship upon the basis of selfish interest, and by unscrupulous methods, are to be refused. All not excluded by that negative description are included. The glory and beauty of friendship is recognized by the very warnings uttered against those who are not true friends. There is no more important hour in the life of youth or maiden than that in which they begin to choose their companions. If that wisdom, which begins in the fear of the Lord, master the life, then such choices will be made as will contribute to strength of character. At last there comes the day when the youth passes out into the street, the broad place, the chief place of concourse, at the gates, into the city itself.

To him:

**“Wisdom crieth without;
She uttereth her voice in the streets;
She crieth in the chief place of concourse;
In the openings of the gates,
In the city, she uttereth her words.”**

The first word of wisdom to the youth going out from home, and beyond his first circle of friendships, into the wide world with its bustle and turmoil is a word of solemn warning against the evil of the way of those who have no fear of the Lord, who do not live in right relationship with Him, and a word of gracious promise:-

**“Whoso hearkeneth unto me shall dwell safely,
And shall be quiet from fear of evil.”**

Wisdom does not call the youth back from the street and the place of concourse, and the crowds and busy life; but warns him of the fate of those who enter those circumstances in forgetfulness of God, and declares that if he hearken to her, and live in the fear of the Lord, he will be quiet and safe, even in the turmoil of the city.

If the youth do not learn wisdom from father and mother, how terrible the start in the city is. He does not understand the voice of wisdom; he cannot hear it. We must teach our children the language of wisdom before they pass out into the hurly-burly of life, or there they may fail to detect it. One, taught by father and mother, who has made his first friendships upon the basis of that instruction, passing into the city, hears and understands the cry of wisdom as through the ruin and failure she warns him, and declares that he shall be quiet and safe if he will be true to that fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom. Let those who live in the villages, from which young lives are ever pouring into the cities, see to it that they are instructed in the fear of the Lord.

If they come, having learned wisdom in the home, and having practiced it in the choosing of their first companions, all hell cannot ruin them.

I am no more afraid for the young man who comes into London with the fear of God in his heart, than I am if he stays in the village. When I see young people entering the city from professing Christian homes, who yet have never been instructed, and do not know the secrets of strength, then I tremble.

Then follows a series of discourses, all beginning with the words “**My son.**”

These constitute the voice of home sounding in the soul of the youth who has departed into the midst of life’s hurry and bustle. The father tells how his father had taught him, and how he had been saved by the teaching, and had proved it true in the selfsame rush of life.

Then exhortation follows exhortation:

- Against impurity,
- Against indolence,
- Against bad companionships,
- Against adultery.

Finally, I see the young man not merely facing the excitement of the city, but climbing towards high position; and wisdom comes to him again in the most wonderful appeal the Bible utters, except that of the Voice which speaks the very language of humanity when at last Wisdom is incarnate. The discourses close with a contrast most vivid and most remarkable.

Wisdom and folly are each personified as a woman:

- The first as a woman of virtue and beauty and glory, and
- The second as a woman of vice and ugliness and shame.

In that superlative contrast there is figuratively set before young life the value and victory of wisdom, and the disaster and defeat of folly; in other words, the wisdom of the fear of the Lord, and the folly of forgetfulness of God.

The living message is to be discovered in the permanent value. It finds its complete expression in words as fresh as the day in which we live, though they come to us from the long gone centuries.

The precepts are stated thus:-

**“My son, forget not my law;
But let thine heart keep my commandments:
For length of days, and long life,
And peace, shall they add to thee.
Let not mercy and truth forsake thee:
Bind them about thy neck;
Write them upon the table of thine heart:
So shalt thou find favour and good understanding
In the sight of God and man.”**

The practice is enjoined thus:

**“Trust in the LORD with all thine heart,
And lean not onto thine own understanding:
In all thy ways acknowledge Him,
And He shall direct thy paths.
Be not wise in thine own eyes;
Fear the LORD, and depart from evil:
It shall be health to thy navel,
And marrow to thy bones.
Honour the LORD with thy substance,
And with the firstfruits of all thine increase:
So shall thy barns be filled with plenty,
And thy fats shall burst out with new wine.”**

That is not out of date.

I remember well the date when I first left home for school. The last thing my father said to me was this: I want to give you a motto for life. **“In all thy ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct thy paths.”** One cannot give any boy a better motto. That is the beginning of wisdom. It is the qualification for becoming wise. A man in right relationship to God holds the key of all secrets. I turn to the New Testament for the final words:

**“If any of you lacketh wisdom, let him ask of God,
Who giveth to all liberally and upbraideth not.”**

The word **“wisdom”** in that passage is the exact equivalent of the Old Testament word. There are different words translated **“wisdom”** both in the Old and New Testaments, but the Hebrew word in Proverbs is translated in the Septuagint by that actual word of which James makes use. The Hebrew philosophy is illuminated by the Christian conception in the writing of James.

A little later, in his letter, he described the **“wisdom that is from above”** as **“first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.”**

The self-same word is used by Paul in the crowning Epistle of his system. Concerning the Christ of God, he affirms: **“In Whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden.”**

And again concerning the Church, he declares:

“And ye are complete in Him.”

Thus to-day we begin according to the ancient philosophy:

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom”; but the light about us is brighter than it was in the olden time. God has been manifest in flesh. By that unveiling we have had a revelation of God’s wisdom; and now for all time - at home, in our friendships, and in the midst of the city’s rush and hurry - we listen for the voice of the Son of God; and following the track of His footsteps, we come into the ultimate Wisdom slowly, for we also are oftentimes fools and blind, but surely, for He is forever the All-wise and the perfectly patient One.

~ end of chapter 20 ~

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