

The Old Testament For Grown Ups **Lesson 71 – Introduction to Wisdom Literature**

Introduction

Today we enter a new section of Biblical literature as we cover the books of Job through Song of Songs (Solomon). This section is what is referred to as Hebrew Poetry and Wisdom Literature. Psalms would generally consist of Hebrew Poetry. Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs (and select wisdom Psalms) would consist of Wisdom Literature. Each book of wisdom has unique ideas and shares ancient wisdom about the world, humanity, and God, but all of the books are trying to teach the audience what it means to live a good life. The word ‘wisdom’ (in it’s forms) occurs 101 times in Proverbs, 28 times in Job, and 53 in Ecclesiastes.

Wisdom literature deal with several topics:

Theodicy: the reality of pain, suffering, and death in the world in relationship to God’s holiness and justice.

The Retribution Principle: divine retribution based on the merits (or demerits) of human behavior.

Instruction: instructions and warnings of the sayings aimed at regulating daily life

The Nature of Wisdom: The Fear of the Lord

The word for “wisdom” originally denoted some kind of technical skill, aptitude, or ability. The word also means “superior mental ability.” In wisdom literature, biblically speaking, a brief definition runs as follows: “Wisdom is the ability to make godly choices in life.” You achieve this goal by applying God’s truth to your life, so that your choices will indeed be godly.

Biblical wisdom has two significant characteristics:

First, the text appeals to practical experience to instruct the believer in godly living. The author can demonstrate right living by appealing to a figure who, when faced with the choice of wisdom or foolishness, chooses God’s way over the world’s way.

A second characteristic of Wisdom Literature is an unwavering appeal to dependence on the God of the Bible. Here the Wisdom Literature of the Bible contrasts human wisdom (which it determines to be foolishness) with Divine Wisdom.

Wisdom begins with the Lord: “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”, therefore God is the source of all wisdom, and for humans to have access to that wisdom, we need to have a relationship with God characterized by a “fear”, or “reverence” toward God and His truth.

This fear is not the type of fear that makes someone run away, but rather is something like the word “awe.” “Fear” of God demonstrates an awareness that the other person, in this case God, is immensely powerful and overwhelmingly wise. This type of fear leads to glad obedience (because you know obeying will turn out for your good), it leads to humility (because you know that God is wiser than you), and it leads to life (because this wisdom protects, prospers, and fulfills).

And as in characteristic number one, this “fear” is worked out in very practical ways as we apply these truths to our lives. Wisdom is not something theoretical and abstract — it is something that exists only when a person thinks and acts according to truth when making the many choices that life demands.

The Types of Wisdom Literature

There are essentially two genres of wisdom literature in the Old Testament. The first and most prevalent type is didactic or practical wisdom. The book of Proverbs is the most representative example of this practical instruction. Didactic wisdom consists of wise sayings or popular proverbs that advocate all sorts of prudential habits, skills, and virtues (e.g., Prov. 21:23; 22:3; 23:22). These utilitarian lessons were aimed at developing moral character, personal success and happiness, safety, and well-being.

The second type of Old Testament wisdom is that found in Ecclesiastes, or Qoheleth, and to some extent Job. The genre is usually categorized as philosophical, speculative, or even pessimistic wisdom. This strand of wisdom tradition is critical, reflective, and questioning as it delves into the deeper and more vexing issues confronting humankind. The skepticism characteristic of this speculative and philosophical literature portrays most vividly the emptiness and folly of the search for insight and understanding apart from God (Eccl. 1:1-18; 12:12-14).

More About Wisdom

The Paths of Wisdom: The Bible knows only two “paths” of life. Either one follows the way of the righteous, or one walks in the way of the wicked (Ps. 1). In Proverbs those who walk the narrow path of righteousness are called “wise” (10:8, 14), “upright” (11:3, 6), and “righteous” (10:16, 20); those who carelessly speed down the broad road are labeled “fools” (10:1, 8, 14), “wicked” (10:3, 6, 7), and “unfaithful ones” (11:3).

The Personification of Wisdom: The personification of wisdom in the book of Proverbs also illustrates the personal aspects of the fear of the Lord. You will see that in Proverbs wisdom is referred to as ‘she’, why is this? These personifications have been referred to as Lady Wisdom and Madam Folly.

Madam Folly is an adulteress (2:16, NASB). She “leaves the companion of her youth” (2:17). The one who is foolish enough to become involved with her must deal with an angry husband (6:29-35). She must assure her victim that her husband is not at home and won’t return for some time (7:19-20). Madam Folly is godless and immoral. She “forgets the covenant of her God” (2:17). She is often called a “foreign woman” (2:16), suggesting that her religion is pagan, rather than a vital faith in Israel’s God. Madam Folly is senseless and simple (9:13). She does not consider her own path or the fact that it leads others to death. She is shameless about her sin: (4:6). This is the way of an adulterous woman: She eats and wipes her mouth, And says, “I have done no wrong” (Prov. 30:20).

Lady Wisdom, on the other hand, is personified as a virgin, whom the wise son should pursue, and with whom he should seek a wholesome, yet intimate relationship as a wife. She is more precious than jewels; And nothing you desire compares with her (3:15). “Do not forsake her, and she will guard you; Love her, and she will watch over you (4:6). If Madam Folly is godless, Lady Wisdom is God-like: She offers to give men her spirit (1:23). She guards men and delivers them from the way of death (1:33; 2:16ff.; 4:6-9). She is called a “tree of life” in 3:18. Lady Wisdom warns men of the destruction and death into which all who continue on the path of folly will fall (1:24ff.). She offers her teaching and commandments (7:1-2), counsel and sound wisdom (8:14). She promises security (1:33), peace, long life, riches and honor (3:16-17), and, most of all, life (3:18)

Guidelines in Interpreting Wisdom

When reading wisdom there are some things we need to remember in order to interpret the Bible well and to rightly apply it to our lives.

1. Wisdom literature deals in generalities, not always specifics (The wicked suffer, the righteous prosper)
2. Wisdom literature, especially proverbs, should be read as principles, not promises (if you work hard you’ll succeed or be rich)
3. We need to understand that ancient literature is diverse (it comes in different forms: instruction, poetic)
4. We need to understand the terms and categories of Hebrew wisdom (what does ‘fool’ mean?)
5. We need to read wisdom literature as a whole, in it’s context, not just in bits and pieces (what is the whole argument of Job or Ecclesiastes, and who is making the argument, and what is the conclusion of the matter?)
6. Remember that all wisdom is fulfilled and embodied in Christ.