Wisdom: What Is It, And How Do We Get It?

A SUPPLEMENTARY LESSON

In the previous lesson, we focused on Solomon’s request for wisdom and suggested that all of us need it. The Bible often speaks of the significance of wisdom and challenges people to acquire it:

How blessed is the man who finds wisdom
And the man who gains understanding
(Proverbs 3:13).

Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding!
(Proverbs 4:5a, b).

How much better it is to get wisdom than gold!
And to get understanding is to be chosen above
silver (Proverbs 16:16).

A man’s wisdom illumines him and causes his
. . . face to beam (Ecclesiastes 8:1b).

Those who are wise will shine like the brightness
of the heavens (Daniel 12:3a; NIV).

. . . be wise in what is good and innocent in
what is evil (Romans 16:19).

. . . be careful how you walk, not as unwise
men but as wise (Ephesians 5:15).

Conduct yourselves with wisdom . . . (Colossians 4:5).

Before we resume the story of Solomon’s life, perhaps it would be worthwhile to have a lesson that asks, “What is wisdom, and how do we get it?” I recently asked some friends what first came to their minds when they heard the word “wisdom.” Their answers included terms like “knowledge,” “discernment,” “experience,” and “maturity.” A few referred to individuals whom they considered wise. Several shared extended comments on the subject. It was obvious that most have some concept regarding wisdom. It was also obvious that the topic of wisdom is far-reaching, impacting many areas of activity.

I also checked a Bible dictionary\(^1\) to see what it had to say about wisdom. In the Old Testament, the noun הָלָּמְדָה (hokmah) is found 141 times and means “wisdom; experience; shrewdness.” The verb form הָקָם (hākam) is used 20 times and means “to be wise, act wisely, make wise.” The adjective form הָקָם (hākām) is found 132 times and means “wise; skillful; practical.” The word “skillful” is notable in the adjective definition.

In secular usage, this adjective could describe a man who was a skilled craftsman (see 1 Kings 7:14).

The Bible refers to wisdom that is to be desired and wisdom that is not. Paul called the latter “the wisdom of this world” (1 Corinthians 3:19; see 1 Corinthians 1:20), and James referred to it as wisdom that is “earthly, natural, demonic”\(^1\)

(James 3:15). This type of “wisdom” is characterized by pride, shrewdness, craftiness, deviousness, and sometimes even delusion and deception. We might think of this as pseudo-wisdom, while the wisdom to be desired is true wisdom.

The subject of wisdom cannot be adequately covered in a single lesson. However, I developed a chart that touches on some major aspects of the topic (see page 4). Let us take a look at the key points.

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

Like many Bible words, “wisdom” is described in the Bible but not defined. As I was growing up, the definition of wisdom I heard most often was “the proper use of knowledge.” While that is a factor in true wisdom, the description seems not to say enough. Through the years, I have encountered a variety of definitions. At the moment, my favorite definition is this: “True wisdom is coming to see things as God sees them.” Such a viewpoint will impact one’s way of life.

How can a person come to see things as God sees them? The Bible tells us how to start on the pathway to true wisdom: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10a; see Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7). “The fear of the Lord” is based on a firm conviction that He exists and a heartfelt appreciation for what and who He is. This “fear” refers to a deep, abiding reverence and respect for the Lord, the Creator and Sustainer of all things. “The fear of the Lord” is both the origin of true wisdom and its aim.

That is probably the most important fact to understand about true wisdom. In the pursuit of wisdom, an individual must start with faith in, and respect for, the Lord. If he does not, it will not matter how much knowledge or experience he attains, how many degrees he earns, or how wise the world considers him to be. “Wisdom” without faith will always have an empty spot at its core.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF WISDOM

True wisdom starts with the fear of the Lord, but then it must develop. Wisdom is not so much a destination as a journey. The Bible teaches that wisdom is a gift from God (Proverbs 2:6; Ecclesiastes 2:26; James 1:5), but God expects us to be active in appropriating His gift. In the previous lesson, when we looked at Solomon’s request and God’s response (1 Kings 3:9–12; 2 Chronicles 1:10–12), we noted several essential elements of true wisdom. These included knowledge and understanding (discernment/insight).

“Wisdom,” “knowledge,” and “understanding” are often linked in the Bible. The terms are sometimes used interchangeably (Proverbs 1:7; 2:6; 3:13; 16:16; 24:3; Colossians 2:3). Solomon wrote, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Proverbs 9:10; emphasis mine). To make a distinction between the words, we might say that knowledge is the accumulation of truth, understanding is the comprehension of truth, and wisdom is the application of truth.

Let us look again at the wording of Proverbs 9:10. The writer was not speaking of knowledge in general, but “knowledge of the Holy One.” I am a firm believer in education and am convinced that one should continually exercise his mind. However, true wisdom is not based on worldly knowledge, but on knowing about God and the ways of God. Paul urged, “So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (Ephesians 5:17).

How does one gain the knowledge and understanding that are needed to be wise? A good start is a serious study of the Book that reveals God: the Bible. David wrote, “The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple” (Psalm 19:7; emphasis mine). Paul said that “the sacred writings . . . are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation” (2 Timothy 3:15; emphasis mine).

Our study of the Bible should have a strong
emphasis on the New Testament of Christ: “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom…” (Colossians 3:16; emphasis mine). Peter challenged Christians to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

Closely related to our study of the Word is prayer. Solomon prayed for wisdom, and so should we. James wrote, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5; emphasis mine). The more we pray, the closer we get to the source of true wisdom, God.

Other factors relating to the development of wisdom might be mentioned; let us consider two. One might be summed up as “experience, age, or maturity.” Job said, “Wisdom is with aged men, with long life is understanding” (Job 12:12; emphasis mine). Sadly, this is not automatic. The world has no lack of old fools. Wisdom comes to those who learn and profit from their experiences. As stated in 1 Kings 3:9, the reason Solomon wanted wisdom was to enable him “to discern between good and evil.” The writer of Hebrews indicated that “the mature, . . . because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil” (Hebrew 5:14; emphasis mine).

Another factor in developing wisdom is listening to wise counsel. Solomon wrote, “He who walks with wise men will be wise” (Proverbs 13:20; emphasis mine; see 13:10). We read, “Fools despise wisdom and instruction” (1:7). One who desires to be wise must be willing to listen to those who are more knowledgeable and experienced than he. “Listen to counsel,” Solomon said, “and accept discipline, that you may be wise the rest of your days” (19:20; emphasis mine).

THE EXPRESSION OF WISDOM

Earlier, I commented that wisdom is not so much defined as described in the Bible. Proverbs is packed with examples of how the wise conduct themselves, in contrast with the actions of the foolish. Here are some examples:

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes,
But a wise man is he who listens to counsel
(Proverbs 12:15).

A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil,
But a fool is arrogant and careless
(Proverbs 14:16).

A fool always loses his temper,
But a wise man holds it back
(Proverbs 29:11).

Proverbs offers excellent guidance, but I want us to focus on two key passages in the New Testament. The first is the teaching on the wise and foolish builders at the close of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. He said,

Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock.
And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock (Matthew 7:24, 25; emphasis mine).

Wisdom is expressed in obedience to the commandments of the Lord. It is not enough to know and understand; we must do. The best measure of wisdom is not how clever it sounds, but how well it obeys. “Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin” (James 4:17).

The second passage is the teaching on “the wisdom from above” in the Book of James. The section begins by asking, “Who among you is wise and understanding?” Then it says, “Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom” (3:13; emphasis mine). What sort of “good behavior” demonstrates that one is wise? The text goes on to say, “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy” (3:17).

How much progress have you made on the road to wisdom? You might ask, “Am I pure? Am I peaceable? Am I gentle? Am I reasonable? Am I full of mercy and good fruits? Am I unwavering regarding the truth of God’s Word? Am I without hypocrisy?” The list says nothing about being smart or having a good education. True wisdom is not about academic degrees or intelligence; it has a distinctive moral quality.

Before closing the discussion on wisdom, let us consider another expression: “common sense.” This phrase is not found in most translations, but the CJB frequently uses it instead of “wisdom” or “understanding”:

The first and foremost point of wisdom is the fear of ADONAI; all those living by it gain common sense . . . (Psalm 111:10; emphasis mine).
My son, . . . preserve common sense and discretion (Proverbs 3:21; emphasis mine).

As for you, you fools, get some common sense! (Proverbs 8:5c, d; emphasis mine).

The dictionary defines “common sense” as “sound judgment not based on specialized knowledge.” A person with common sense understands how to deal with practical matters; we might think of it as wisdom in its work clothes. According to a Persian proverb, “For every pound of learning a person has, he needs ten pounds of common sense to know how to use it.” Common sense tells us the right thing to say and the right time to say it. It lets us know the right thing to do and the right time to do it. More than once, I have heard it said of some individual, “He needs less book sense and more common sense.”

CONCLUSION

In my research on Solomon’s wisdom, I kept encountering this comment and question: “Solomon could have asked for anything, but he asked for wisdom. What would you have asked for?” It is a question worth considering. What if you could have anything you asked for—anything at all? What would you request? Money or success? Popularity or prestige? Maybe your request would be more personal: good health, a happy home, or peace of mind. How many of us would ask for wisdom? We all need wisdom to be the best fathers, mothers, or children we can be. Wisdom is necessary to be the best employer or employee possible. Everyone needs wisdom to deal with the challenges of life, whether great or small.

In this lesson, we have tried to emphasize that we all need wisdom and to indicate how wisdom can be developed. Are we doing what is required to develop true wisdom?

Are we daily striving to grow in our reverence and respect for the Lord? Is growing closer to God a major goal in our lives? Are we trying to become serious Bible students? Do we take the time to pray to God on a regular basis? As we study, do we make personal application of the Scriptures to our lives? Are we developing the qualities of “the wisdom from above”?

May God help us all to “be careful how [we] walk, not as unwise men but as wise” (Ephesians 5:15).

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