

Wisdom

In the Bible, the book of Proverbs is known as "wisdom literature". It is the Biblical command to read creation and the natural order well, that we may learn from the wisdom God imprinted onto it. But when you think about Proverbs, are they really true?

We have a proverb in our culture today: "The early bird gets the worm." Presumably, it means something like "if you work harder than others, then you will be more successful", roughly speaking. But is that always true? Of course not! Proverbs are something like "the way the world tends to work", but they are not, strictly speaking, true.

But that's where wisdom begins, in proverbs. When teaching children, we teach them that "you reap what you sow", which is one of the most profound Biblical axioms. But if that is taken as an absolute truth, then there is no room for unmerited favor/grace. That means that parents are going to have to problematize that initial lesson.

We're all familiar with the concept of "problematization". When the secondary/middle school student opens his physics textbook, he still learns that the atom is really like little particles whizzing around one another in a really cool-looking Jimmy Neutron arrangement. But when they do graduate work, they learn that that's not really what the fundamental particles of reality look like. They're really something like waves or strings or god-knows-what. But they sure aren't particles like they were initially taught.

If we were going to teach brute truth right from the start, we would have to teach 13 year olds that the fundamental particles that make up matter are really probability wave functions that collapse based on observation or something like that, and no teenager should have to go through that. So we teach them an older model, maybe even something that we already know is false first, and then subsequently problematize it for them when they are able to handle it.

This is the same as what is going on with wisdom in the Bible. Wisdom begins in Proverbs. These are the general contours of how the world works, and you don't have to be a believer to know them nor live by them. In the Proverbs, God and life are almost formulaic and mathematical. We can get a grip on them. "If I just lived this way according to XYZ, then my life will go well."

Proverbs will then get problematized in the book of Job. Here we have a man who has lived by all the proverbs, faithful, God-fearing man whose life gets blown to crap. Here, the formula explicitly breaks down. No, living strictly according to the Proverbs is no guarantee of anything, and not just what the Christian is called to. Here, God is the whirlwind that we all have to stand before. We can't "nail him down", or "get him right" in any sense, but we stand in his judgment with nothing to say. In Job, the fools are his friends, and they are the men of proverbs, they bear all the wisdom of proverbs. Life is not as simple as it seemed in Proverbs.

Then the Psalms show us the next step of wisdom as being able to come bare before God. The people of God are called to learn to be comfortable being naked before God, a theme that began at the end of Job. The people of God are called to learn to lament before God, to face reality and name evil for what it truly is, but in God's presence. There is an increasing invitation to live in reality as opposed to fantasy, in how the world actually is as opposed to how we would like it to be. Evil must be named and called out for what it is both in the world and in the Church.

Next we move into the New Testament and Covenant where we get this theme that Christ is wisdom itself. In Proverbs, Wisdom is personified but in the New Testament we learn that Wisdom is really Christ himself. The children of God are called to this new revelation (Luke 11:49, Matt. 23:34, 1 Cor. 1:30).

Finally, in James, the end is kingdom wisdom. Ironically, what we find on wisdom in James actually looks a lot like what we found in Proverbs. But James is writing about wisdom from the perspective within the kingdom of God. In Proverbs, wisdom looked common between the believer and the unbeliever, because Proverbial wisdom is part of God's general revelation. But for James, wisdom, true wisdom, is only found within the kingdom of God. Proverbial wisdom is now foolishness. This isn't to say that Proverbs don't work anymore, but that the child of God is called to something far better and beyond Proverbial wisdom. The unbeliever who does lives by Proverbs is going to look at the believer who lives by James and think, "This guy's an idiot!" So the call for the children of God is a call into wisdom, true wisdom that is Christ himself. It is a call to relationality with a person and not a list of laws or sayings. Ultimately, the wise person is the one who is found "in Christ", and not the one who lives in accordance to certain laws.