

Group Study – The Wisdom of Creation

Scholar William Brown writes, “To live in wisdom’s world is to experience the joy of discovery, the delight of discernment, the thrill of edifying play.”

We rarely think of wisdom as an experience of joy, but for a moment, consider your experiences through this lens.

Where do you experience these joys, delights, and thrills? Share the ways that God’s creation brings you joy.

How do these experiences connect to our understanding of wisdom?

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Good Faith Bible Study Podcast Transcript

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"The Wisdom of Creation"

Proverbs 8

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In this week’s lesson, we shift to the book of Proverbs, part of the Bible’s “wisdom literature,” to explore another aspect of God’s creation. In the lesson, we’ll trace the famous personification of Lady Wisdom, and the role that she plays with God at creation.

So for this podcast, let’s take a closer look at “wisdom” in the biblical text. What **is** biblical wisdom? How might wisdom from above, as James calls it, shape our lives?

Technically, “wisdom literature” in the Old Testament refers to three biblical books: Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. This approach could be called the “canonical” definition of wisdom. But more broadly speaking of wisdom as a genre, “wisdom” texts can be found in many corners of the biblical story, including some psalms, for example, and the sermon recorded in the book of James.

The Old Testament itself uses a variety of words to convey its wisdom perspective. I'll mention the Hebrew terms, but focus on the definitions, and what dimensions these concepts add to this overall concept of wisdom in the Old Testament.

The primary term for wisdom is *hokma*, which can mean “wisdom,” but also “skill,” or “shrewdness.” The word is used in a really surprising number of ways. It can refer to being skilled in combat, or having some kind of technical skill – like maybe being really good at text-messaging. It can refer to being a shrewd and clever leader, like King David or maybe like Queen Elizabeth. It can refer to having the ability to know the right action in really hard situations, or maybe to find the right path when confronted with moral quandaries, like King Solomon demonstrates. And finally, just this one biblical wisdom term can refer to someone who recognizes God as creator of the world and source of all knowledge.

Even this multi-sided term is not the last word on wisdom. The word *musar* denotes the idea of discipline or correction. Another term, *sakal*, conveys the idea of having the prudence and insight to successfully navigate the world. *Bin* and *da'at* communicate the intellectual aspect of wisdom, while *sedeq* and *mishpat* relate to the ethical dimension of wisdom.

The Old Testament draws on all of these words to bring the wisdom literature to life. Not surprisingly, the books themselves focus on defining what wisdom actually is, and how to go about getting wisdom, and what the results ought to be once you have it. The wisdom writers look at creation, human life, and they observe its structure and order in an effort to understand how to best navigate the world and life. And at the same time, the wisdom writers maintain that such wisdom is ultimately a gift from God, just like creation and life themselves.

So, if we want to understand Old Testament wisdom, we first and foremost have to understand that it's not just about knowing stuff. It's about knowing how to skillfully apply knowledge to navigate life. In short, Old Testament wisdom is **the art of living well**.

This emphasis on living well quite naturally gives wisdom a really human focus. It offers practical insights that humans have observed about life and natural workings of the world. And wisdom seeks to impart observed knowledge to readers so that they also can navigate life and the world effectively, with the most success and enjoyment. Many verses within the book of Proverbs offer this practical wisdom through, well, proverbs. A proverb is a concise statement of apparent truth that has currency, or it has staying power. Biblical proverbs concern really important matters for everyday life: money, loving the right person, comparing wise and foolish words and knowing which ones to follow.

The wisdom perspective in Proverbs is sometimes called orthodox, or traditional, or sometimes positive wisdom. It operates on the assumption that the world works in a particular way: The wise path leads to blessing; the foolish path leads to cursing. And, sometimes, that's really not a bad summary of the way things work. But consider where such an assumption could lead if it was left unchecked. We might start to think that these two paths worked just as predictably in the opposite direction as well. That is, someone who was blessed – wealthy, healthy, charming, whatever – was therefore enjoying the benefits of the wise path. And conversely, someone pressed beneath the unbearable weight of tragedy – poverty, sickness, calamity – well, that person was necessarily receiving the due pay of a wicked life.

And of course there are hazards to this logic. The problem – and this problem has been a thorn in the minds of theologians and philosophers for thousands of years – the problem is that sometimes the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer. This inexplicable aspect of the human experience is what makes the orthodox or traditional wisdom of proverbs more like **guidelines** than like a mathematical equation. It remains best, of course, to avoid the foolish path. But the wise path is not insulated from difficulty.

Now, if you are troubled by this, you have a long history of human reflection to keep you company.

So thankfully, we find that biblical wisdom also wrestles with questions about the nature of human experience, and it invites readers into these difficult dialogues.

A very brief, and perhaps risky, summary of the three canonical wisdom books might be as follows:

- Proverbs: *Good things happen to good people; bad things happen to bad people. Choose to be good.*
- The book of Job: *Yeah, but bad things happen to good people; and good things happen to bad people. Please explain.*
- And then, Ecclesiastes: *The things that happen to people are just inexplicable; deal with it as best as you can.*

Okay. After that last summary statement, we are going to have to talk at least a little bit about Ecclesiastes. This wisdom book is notoriously difficult to interpret. In fact, one Old Testament scholar called it “the strangest book in the canon.”

The main speaker in the book is *Qoheleth*, which is a Hebrew word meaning “Teacher” or “Preacher.” This Qoheleth tests and dismantles commonly accepted wisdom. Meaning, or wisdom, is not to be found in youth, pleasure, even education!

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In place of conventional wisdom, Qoheleth reconstructs new wisdom standards, accepting the fleeting and unpredictable nature of life, our human finitude, and the inaccessibility of divine understanding. Instead of these lofty and inaccessible goals, Qoheleth places emphasis on the quiet life, the simple life, the enjoyed life, a balanced approach to virtue and vice, and above all else, **the fear of God**.

Because while biblical wisdom has a human focus, at its heart, it is also **deeply theological**. The key theme of biblical wisdom is that the source or foundation of wisdom is found in the awe and reverence of its divine source. Without that source – without God – the biblical story sees no possibility for wisdom.

Proverbs 8 paints a vivid picture for us, as God gives birth to wisdom at the dawn of creation, and so sets the stage for all of God's people to practice the art of living well.