

Proverbs 2: Value of Wisdom

June 14, 2020

We continue our study of Proverbs with Chapter 2. The first few words reflect what we saw in the “introductory” chapter, in 1:8 “Hear, my son, your Father’s instructions, and reject not your mother’s teachings; ...” Notice “hear,” not “read.” In antiquity, it was expected that words of wisdom would be delivered spoken. Indeed, ancient systems of writing were more of a way to keep records and remind a speaker what to say. Even in New Testament times, Greek was written in a style called “Biblical Unical,” that is, all capital letters, with no spaces between words, and no punctuation. That makes it difficult to read, at least the first time. But typically, the reader was saying the words aloud, very familiar words, and only needed to glance at what was written occasionally. Paul’s letters, even, were not meant to be circulated and read silently among members of a congregation, but to be read aloud, by a message bearer, who was familiar with the contents. Hebrew, in antiquity, not only omitted spaces between words and punctuation, but also the vowels. So the reader needed to be quite familiar with the language; one needed to decode the (typically) three letter codes for words and know how to pronounce them.

Have you ever stopped to marvel at language and speech and reading? We take these things for granted. Children learn these things without our really understanding how. Yes, we do try to “school” them in reading. Getting a bit of instruction for that helps. But the rest is a marvel beyond understanding, that starts with children hearing their parents’ voices. By the time they are five or six years old, they are amazingly proficient. So, why is it that they need another dozen or so years to be considered “adults”? We know why; there is still much to learn! Much that a child of five or six, just starting school, can’t yet comprehend.

So, here’s where the book of Proverbs comes in. As best I understand it, after the exile, the collection of Proverbs, credited to Solomon and various other wise men, was organized as we have it. It seems to have served as something of a textbook, specifically for young men approaching adulthood. These words of wisdom would have been spoken. The reader was likely not literally the young man’s father, but a “wise man” given the responsibility of further preparing the young men of a community, very likely the local rabbi. (Unlike our own younger years, after the printing press had been invented, written material was precious and uncommon. Students would not have had their own copies, as we did our textbooks. The teacher would convey this wisdom by reading it aloud.)

Now, make no mistake; “wisdom” was not the sole preserve of men, as some might extrapolate from the “father to son” language of Proverbs. Indeed, the first people titled as “wise” in the Bible are two women, unnamed, but obviously important, in II Samuel 14 (the wise woman of Tekoa) and 20:14 ff. (the wise woman of Bethmaacah). It may well be that a leading “wise woman” was an important office in at least some cities of the time. Similarly, the first named prophet in the Bible is Moses’s sister Miriam, who saw the events at the Red Sea and proclaimed that this was God’s work. We know about the importance of Deborah during the time of the Judges. By the time the Proverbs collection was edited into its current form, young women would have been expected to learn from their mothers, just as young men from their fathers. But this extra step of more formal instruction that we are reading was reserved for, and tailored for, just the young men.

Proverbs Chapter 2 is all one long poem. Indeed, grammatically, it is all one sentence! Do you recall diagramming sentences back in high school or junior high? We almost need to do that to follow the structure of this chapter. (Our NRSV translation puts a period at the end of verse 11. The RSV puts a semicolon there, and KJV puts a colon.) The overall structure is:

If (verses 1-4 – seek and receive wisdom)

Then (verses 5-8 - first of five blessings: knowledge of God)

Then (verses 9-11 – second blessing: live ordered by wisdom)

(Then implied) (verses 12-15 – third blessing: protection from evil men)

(Then implied) (verses 16-19 – fourth blessing: protection from evil women)

(So–then implied) (verses 20-22 – fifth blessing: for those who walk in wisdom)

Verses 1 and 2 distinguish teachings of wisdom from teachings of the Law. “.. if you receive my words ...” The wise man is speaking his own words of wisdom, and so, in a sense, with his own authority. This is a marked contrast to the words of a prophet, who speaks saying, “Thus saith the LORD,” By Jesus’s time, the written scripture (the Law and the Prophets), as well as written words in The Writings (such as Proverbs and Psalms), played a much more important role. Proverbs was a written book; the teacher would be depending on his source as an authority, not as much his own meditations or thoughts. Even the spoken Law enforced by the Pharisees was based on tradition. Student Pharisees such as the young Saul would have learned from their teachers what wise men of old had said, and would have depended on being able to quote such “authorities” in their discourse. Much like scholarship in our day.

That's why Jesus's teaching was so revolutionary. At the conclusion of "The Sermon on the Mount," in Matthew 7:28, we read: **Now when Jesus had finished saying these things** [his teachings in Matt 5-7], **the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught as one having authority, and not as their scribes.** People of Jesus's day were used to teaching always referencing sources and citations. Jesus WAS an authority, not just a learned source of quotes.

Getting back to Proverbs 2: Verses 2 - 5 make clear that it's not enough just to "hear". We need to "listen", "be attentive", "seek" and "search". We hear lots of stuff that we don't ever notice. For example, Cindy and I live right off of Wyoming Avenue. There is traffic. There is a traffic signal where trucks and other vehicles screech to a stop and loudly accelerate on the green. Often I hear it. Occasionally I even notice it. When we have had company stay with us, though, it can be disturbing to them. For us, not noticing it is helpful. It is just noise with little or no meaning. But, let us not get so used to hearing God's word, or words of wisdom, that we let it wash over us without listening! Do you recall being in school and just not paying attention at all to what was being taught? I can. Such teaching did not do me any good. In some cases I rationalized that I didn't need to listen. In many of those, and other cases, I certainly should have! I wasted time, and threw away a teacher's efforts. The writer of this poem is telling us to take advantage of the opportunity. These words are a gift, a blessing, that we should pursue diligently.

The first blessing is that, for those who listen and are upright, they receive "sound wisdom" that comes from God. The term translated as "sound wisdom" is unusual, found outside Job and proverbs only in Isaiah 28:29 and Micah 6:9. The word seems to imply deliverance or protection, seen in the rest of this passage: "he is a shield... guarding the paths of justice and preserving the way of his saints."

The second blessing is understanding righteousness, justice, equity, and "every good path." The effects are "pleasant." This may seem odd. But, consider: doesn't understanding what is going on help us make sense of our circumstances in ways that can make the difficult bearable? As a child, I was on one occasion being taken to the doctor's office to get a "shot". I was perhaps four or five, and I knew what a "shot" was. I didn't understand though. I declared, "I hope we come to a hundred traffic lights, and they are all red!" After the shot had been delivered, I said, "Was that all?" The fear and dread of the shot was much worse than the shot itself. As an adult, my perspective is different. I can take pleasure while waiting

outside a theater, for example, knowing that the concert or show is worth the wait. If it's a familiar one, I can in my mind hear or see scenes I can anticipate as I wait, or take pleasure in conversation about it. Understanding allows us to make more sense of the world we live in, the bad as well as the good. If we can but just have faith that God can use the happenings of our world for His purposes, we can perhaps detach ourselves from fear, and avoid pitfalls, by being "discerning."

The third blessing, 12-15, is specifically protection from evil men. As I read these lines, what comes to my mind are the kinds of evil juvenile boys dream up and like to talk about. I'm sort of put back into the days of my own youth. In the "Christmas Story" movie, the protagonist Ralphie says that there are only "bullies, toadies, and victims." In the movie, the bully and toady are outside his closer world of family and classroom. The bully is a hazard going and coming to school. But probably more commonly, bullying is a part of life for a young boy, even within the classroom (and recess), even within the Sunday school class, possibly within the scout troop, and perhaps within the family. The words of verse 14 ring true: "Who rejoice in doing evil and delight in perverseness of evil." That's the dominant male in the peer group, who coerces others to follow his ways, or be turned into a victim. The result: not only petty crimes, but the use of power to bring others into those crimes as well. These verses may sound different to women. They have their own social problems growing up, and I doubt they are any less stressful than what boys experience. Probably worse. I can't speak to that. I know it's just as real.

The fourth blessing of wisdom is protection from wicked women. Proverbs paints a more detailed picture of this hazard in 7:6-27. I give thanks that I can't speak to this particular with any authority myself, but the hazard is real. Again, this is wisdom specifically to young men. You women can surely describe just as vividly the peril to young women, no less real, and, if anything, even more dangerous. The lesson book lists Genesis 39 as also being a scripture for this week. That's the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. It's a specific illustration of this issue. Even though in the short run Joseph is the one who is hurt (and put in jail), ultimately God uses that event as a means of saving both Egypt and his own people.

The concluding blessing is a summary. It promises good to the righteous. "For the upright will inhabit the land. And men of integrity will remain in it;...." And destruction to the wicked.

To me, this passage also speaks a word of reassurance. We are not alone. There are others remaining, also, who walk in righteousness. I am reminded of the prophet Elijah, threatened by Jezebel, who fled to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. God asked, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah answered, “.... the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” (1 Kings 19: 10) Elijah sees himself as standing completely alone, and seeks refuge where God may be found. But God ultimately tells him, “Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.” (v 18). Elijah is NOT left alone. There remain many faithful, thousands. In his zealousness and focus, Elijah could not see them.

The same is true for us sometimes. There are many good and faithful people in this world. They are not always apparent. In times like these, with the epidemic and its consequences causing havoc, sometimes it is easier to see, to discern, those good people. For example, in the person of doctors and nurses, and others, who are faithful to their calling to help others despite the danger. We need to give thanks to God for those, and for all of God’s many saints among us. We are not alone.