THE BEGINNING AND END OF
WISDOM

Preaching Christ from the First and Last Chapters of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job

Douglas Sean O’Donnell

FOREWORD BY SIDNEY GREIDANUS

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VP  22  21  20  19  18  17  16  15  14  13  12  11
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To my son, Simeon Joseph, who looks in awesome wonder at God’s power throughout the universe displayed

“Look, Da Da, the moon!”
Look, look, flowers. Look!
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I feel honored that Doug O’Donnell invited me to review his new book, *The Beginning and End of Wisdom*, and, he said, if I liked it, to write the foreword. I do indeed like the book: it is well researched and written and fills a real need for preachers and seminary students.

The contemporary need is this: Old Testament Wisdom Literature is one of the more difficult genres to interpret and preach. This need is heightened by the fact that many modern preachers do not know how to preach Christ from these books. Many, therefore, think it the better part of wisdom to omit Wisdom Literature from their preaching schedule.

It is telling that the *Revised Common Lectionary* in its three-year cycle of some 230 Old Testament readings (not including the Psalms) has only eleven readings from Wisdom Literature: four readings from Proverbs (Year B, sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth Sundays after Pentecost, and Year C, first Sunday after Pentecost); five from Job (Years A, B, and C, Holy Saturday, and Year B, twentieth, twenty-first, twenty-second, and twenty-third Sundays after Pentecost), one from Ecclesiastes (Years ABC, New Year); and one from the Song of Solomon (Year B, fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost). This arrangement suggests the possibility of...
a three-sermon series on Proverbs and a four-sermon series on Job once every three years. I am not faulting the *Lectionary* for so few wisdom passages as it seeks to follow the life of Christ through the church year; after all, there are numerous beautiful passages in the Old Testament. But these statistics do indicate that congregations whose preachers follow the *Lectionary* closely will be undernourished with respect to Old Testament wisdom. This is where *The Beginning and End of Wisdom* can provide the needed dietary supplements for the church.

At first reading, the book’s title may seem presumptuous, as if this book is *the beginning and end of wisdom*. But in reading the book you will discover what a wonderfully apt title this is. This title resonates on no less than three levels. First, O’Donnell presents six sermons, one on the beginning and one on the end of three wisdom books: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. Second, the wisdom passages all begin in the Old Testament and all end with Jesus Christ, the very “wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24), “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). And third, in preaching this Old Testament wisdom today, pastors begin with this wisdom so that its end may be transformed lives that live this wisdom. As you read this delightful book, you may discover even more levels where this title resonates.

O’Donnell has a twofold aim with this book: “First, I wish to light a fire beneath you; that is, I desire to help you know and enjoy the Wisdom Literature of the Bible so that you might preach on it more often. Second, I wish to show you how to build a fire; that is, how to preach such literature” (from the preface). He accomplishes both aims. In text, endnotes, quotations, and illustrations, his book witnesses to wide readings and interests (history, theology, biblical hermeneutics, literature, art, current events, preaching), thorough research, and wise judgments. The sound expository sermons are written in a fresh, sometimes witty, oral style, including dialogue with the congregation. But this book consists of much more than six excellent sermons.
Foreword

In writing these six sermons on Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, O’Donnell set himself a major task of research, for each of these books is a different form (sub-genre) of Wisdom Literature; that is, each has a different mix of wisdom forms such as proverb, reflection, instruction, anecdote, and autobiographical narrative. Therefore, each book requires a specific hermeneutical approach (see the separate bibliographies on Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and “Other Resources”). Moreover, preaching a sermon on the beginning as well as the end of each book requires a thorough acquaintance with the whole book. In addition, he seeks not only to preach the Old Testament texts in their Old Testament contexts but to link each message to Jesus Christ in the New Testament: “I want us to put on gospel glasses and look at this text again so that we might see clearly how what we have in Christ . . . changes a buried seed into a budding flower.” This desire for Christocentric sermons requires additional research into the connections between the Old Testament and the New as well as into the New Testament itself. O’Donnell accomplishes these multiple tasks very well. His sermons are biblical, expository, relevant, and interesting. In fact, they sing! At appropriate times the preacher smoothly slides into a higher key and preaches Jesus Christ.

These six sermons are model sermons that will inspire and teach you how to preach Christ from Old Testament wisdom. The many endnotes provide further information and insights. The sermons are followed by a seventh chapter, “How Shall Wisdom Be Preached?” This chapter gives specific tips on how to move from an Old Testament wisdom text to Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Since much of Wisdom Literature is written as poetry, an appendix, “Preaching Hebrew Poetry,” provides more hints for interpreting and preaching this literature. A final appendix offers a brief summary of each book and valuable suggestions for preaching sermon series on Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job.

Before Doug invited me to write a foreword for his new book, I did not know him at all. In fact, our life paths have been remarkably
Foreword

different. But now that our paths have crossed, I recognize in him a kindred spirit whose zeal is the same as mine. This stimulating book will drive you from your study to the pulpit in order to preach Christ from “all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27, 44).

Sidney Greidanus

Author, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes*;
Professor Emeritus of Preaching, Calvin Theological Seminary
I am grateful to God for wisdom. I am grateful to God for an all-wise Savior, the very wisdom of God incarnate. I am grateful to God for wise editors. Thank you, my wonderful editorial “staff,” starting with Emily Gerdts, Matt Newkirk, and John Seward, and ending with Lydia Brownback and the team at Crossway. Good editing has made my sentences sing! I am grateful to God for wise (or growing-in-wisdom) children—Sean, Lily, Evelyn, Charlotte, and, oh, yes, my little man, Simeon, to whom I dedicate this book. Simeon, you remind me daily to look up and look around at the un-ordinariness of God’s creation. May you find the wisdom of Christ even more awe-inspiring!
My midlife crisis came early. Unless, of course, I live to be seventy; in that case, it came right on time. While it was a “crisis” in the sense of a decision, it didn’t involve choosing between buying a red corvette or dyeing my gray hairs brown. I was deciding if I should seek ordination as a Presbyterian pastor. After nineteen years as a devout Roman Catholic and sixteen years as an even more devout nondenominational evangelical, this decision wasn’t easy. In my left ear I could hear my dear Scottish Catholic mother’s voice, still sad about me leaving the one true church and still going on about those wicked Glasgow Presbyterian boys who tossed stones over the fence at her and the other poor, innocent, minding-their-own-business girls of St. Mary’s. In my right ear was the voice of professional prudence and discretion: “As an established evangelical pastor, are you willing to leave the theological flexibility of nondenominationalism and be publically enjoined with those who fervently defend Calvinism, infant baptism, and the spiritual presence of Christ in the sacramental wine?” Eventually I quelled these voices, cleared my head, and made a decision. I enrolled in
“the most perfect school of Christ,”¹ and thus began my journey to Geneva.

The road toward ordination, however, was more arduous than expected. It would require college and seminary transcripts, a letter from my church, and then a good deal of personal and academic writing. I had to submit a summary of my Christian experience and call to ministry, paragraphs on thirteen issues in theology, six exams, an exegetical essay, a theological paper, and a sermon manuscript. Once completed, all my work would then be reviewed by the Candidates and Credentials Committee of the regional Presbytery. If approved, I would twice stand before the Presbytery for oral examinations, where I could be asked any and all relevant questions:

How did you come to Christ?
What is the chief end of man?
What is justification?
Name the five points of Calvinism.
What is a censure?
When did the PCA and the RPCES become one?
What is the square root of the year J. Gresham Machen left Princeton?

On the morning I took my first three oral exams—on the English Bible, the Westminster Standards (theology), and The Book of Church Order (church polity)—I also handed my sermon manuscript to the Candidates and Credentials Committee and proceeded to preach the text of the manuscript before them. All the members of that committee looked so tired, dour, and slightly irritated, much like that fêted picture of John Knox. They sat on brown folding chairs around a brown folding table, all folding their white arms. A few of them laid back in their chairs. Others slumped forward. I stood as straight as I could behind a shorter-than-I’d-wished music stand, my sermon manuscript seemingly seven miles beneath my eyes. The only positive sign was that one member (the head of the committee
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no less) had long hair. The almost-always-correct equation (long hair = leniency) quickly soothed my mind.

I started the sermon.
I finished.
Amen and Amen.

They looked up. I looked up. Our eyes met.

“Okay, that’s it. Thanks. Good job,” the long-haired guy said and smiled. I was right about him.

A few hours later, after I stood before the Presbytery for examination, I was asked to wait in the adjoining room as they voted. I leaned nervously at the doorway of a dingy church kitchen (perhaps “dingy” is redundant). The only barrier between their voices and my ears was new drywall and those out-of-date accordion blinds. In other words, when I listened closely enough, I could hear every word of the “secret counsel” of their predetermined-before-the-foundation-of-the-world determination. I felt as guilty eavesdropping on my inquisitors as I had felt that time years ago when I had lied to Father McLaughlin about how many months it had been since my last confession. And so, after overhearing the first four questions they posed about me, which were addressed to the long-haired guy, the one man who now stood as the only mediator between me and ordination, I decided to retreat into the even dingier but well insulated tan-tiled bathroom. The dialogue of the first few overheard questions, however, still rang in my ears:

How was his sermon?
It was good.
What did he preach on?
He preached on Job 28. (Pause.) It’s not every day that someone preaches on Job 28.
How was his exegetical essay?
Good.
What was it on?
He wrote on Proverbs 31.
Interesting?!
Yes.

Poets and Poems, Words and Wisdom
I’m not sure why it is that when I feel most pressed to prove myself, I turn to the Wisdom Literature of the Bible. Perhaps it has something to do with my natural disposition. I would, for example, scribble lines of poetry while my high school Algebra teacher taught on variables or binary operations or vectors or imaginary numbers or $a + b = b + a$ or whatever else goes on in such a class. And I have continued, without the Algebra-teacher background noise, both to write my own poetry and to dwell on the poetry of others, most notably that of God.

Eleven years ago, I “contributed to scholarship” with my thesis on John Donne’s interpretation of the Song of Solomon in light of the history of biblical interpretation. My first published book, *God’s Lyrics*, is on the songs of Moses, Deborah, Hannah, David, and Habakkuk. And I am currently working on two commentaries, one on Ecclesiastes and another on the Song of Solomon. In my brief decade of pastoral ministry I have taught through all of Ecclesiastes, much of Proverbs, and some of Job. My library is filled with rows of commentaries on Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, the Song of Solomon, and the Psalms, and also with titles such as *Gospel and Wisdom, The Way of Wisdom, Old Testament Wisdom, Hear and Be Wise, and Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*

These are indications not only of a passionate obsession but also of an oddity. I say “oddity” because from my survey of available literature and of other pastors’ libraries and sermons, it appears to me that most men of the cloth today have left these texts and topics in the closet. I find such neglect disappointing yet at the same time invigorating, for if every pastor loved such literature as I do, you wouldn’t be holding the book you have in your hands. (And I wouldn’t be earning a royalty, which keeps the “wealth” dicta of the Wisdom Literature very much in mind!)
The Beginning of Wisdom for Beginners

Rubbing Sticks and Lighting Fires
The aim of this book, if I may be as forthright (yet unambiguous) as the preceding parenthesis, is twofold. First, I wish to light a fire beneath you; that is, I desire to help you know and enjoy the Wisdom Literature of the Bible so that you might preach on it more often. Second, I wish to show you how to build a fire; that is, how to preach such literature. In short this is a book on what the Wisdom Literature is, why we should delight in it, and how we should preach it.

Since this task before us is not simple, you will be relieved to know that this book is laid out quite simply. There are only seven chapters, a number that is both small and, as you probably know, perfect. If I went with more than seven chapters (eight, nine, ten, or so) or less than seven (six, five, or four), we would then find ourselves in a precarious numerological conundrum, of which no poet (especially of the biblical mind) wants to find himself. I say that, of course, tongue in cheek. I do think and hope, however, (with tongue now out of cheek) that seven chapters will perfectly suffice to achieve my twofold aim. Specifically, I hope that the first six chapters, which were originally sermons on the first and last portions of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, will inform and inspire, and that the final chapter will be a practical aid in your calling to declare the excellencies of Jesus Christ from the whole counsel of God’s Word (Acts 20:27; cf. 8:35).
INTRODUCTION

WHY CHRISTIANS ARE FOOLS

If I knew it would require dropping out of school, I probably would have said no. While in graduate school (but not for graduate school), I vowed to read the entire Works of Jonathan Edwards in a year. Yes, the entire works! Stamped on the inside cover of the first volume was this inscription:

These volumes are the gift of John H. Gerstner to Douglas O’Donnell who has vowed to God that he will complete their reading within one year of receiving them. Soli Deo Gloria!

That was the deal: Dr. Gerstner gave me the books for free; I vowed to read them.

When the books came in the mail, I opened them with eager excitement. Free books! Free Edwards! Freedom of the Will! I was converted to Christ when I was nineteen and converted to reading shortly thereafter. My job helped form and feed this new obsession. I worked as an overnight security guard at ServiceMaster’s corporate headquarters. Every three hours I did my rounds. This took about ten minutes each time. The rest of the time—other than eating leftover shrimp in the kitchen from some fancy corporate party,
playing intercom games with the other security guards, strumming my guitar, and doing homework—I read. For four straight years for at least four hours a night, I read dead theologians. I read Augustine. I read Luther. I read Aquinas. I read Calvin. I read Chrysostom. I read Wesley. I read Boethius, for goodness sake. And, yes, I read America’s most renowned theologian.

My fellow security guard, the son of an Iowa farmer, called me a “plower.” He likened my reading habits to his father’s work. “You plow through books slowly but surely, like a plow overturning the soil,” he would say with some affection and subtle admiration. “Next thing I know, you’re done with this huge book.”

Plower or not, half a year into reading Edwards the plow got stuck. I realized that at the pace I was going—the only pace I could go with such complex and interesting material—my vow would be impossible to keep. Something had to give: the rounds? The shrimp? The intercom? The guitar? School?

School! I became a grad school dropout in order to remain a full-time security guard/Edwardsian reader. With a thin yellow highlighter wedged atop my left ear and a red pencil in my right hand, I read, marked, and learned. I underlined and asterisked every important sentence, and then, in the back of each volume, I scribbled my favorite quotes. I finished on December 20, 1994, which I know because I joyfully inscribed it on the front plate beneath Gerstner’s Soli Deo Gloria.

Just the other day I pulled these volumes off my shelf, and I relived that year for a moment. Like rereading the Bible that I first read cover to cover and marked up with obnoxious colors and mutilating markings, these volumes revealed so much of my early Christian life. In those back pages, I saw how much I valued Edwards’s majestic view of God, salvation, and the church:

God is the highest Good of the reasonable creature; and the enjoyment of Him is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied.
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The church is the completeness of Christ, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.

Surely, the more the sinner has an inward, an immediate, and sole, and explicit dependence upon Christ, the more Christ has the glory of his salvation from him.

The man Jesus Christ, who is the head of all creatures, is the most humble of all creatures.

I am bold to say that the work of God in the conversion of one soul . . . is a more glorious work of God than the creation of the whole material world.

To take on yourself to work out redemption is a greater thing than if you had taken it upon you to create a world.

The gospel of the blessed God does not go abroad begging for its evidence, so much as some think: it has its highest and most proper evidence in itself.

There is not so much difference before God, between children and grown persons, as we are ready to imagine; we are all poor, ignorant, foolish babes in His sight. Our adult age does not bring us so much near to God as we are apt to think.

That final quote I liked best. (It has five stars next to it.) And today I still like it in its depiction of how we relate to, explain, and apply the Wisdom Literature of the Bible. In all my study of the Christian faith over these last twenty years, and especially in my recent work on Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, I find Edwards’s thought here instructive. I have gained enormous insight about God, his Word, and his world, and yet I know that I know so little. I have plumbed the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God only to learn that I am still but a poor, ignorant, foolish babe in his sight. I have climbed the
mountains of his unsearchable judgments and inscrutable ways only to find myself not as near to God as I am apt to think.

Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?
The Wisdom Literature is helpful in humbling us before God. It is more helpful, I dare say, than any other part of the Bible. These three books put us in our place. We can dig deep into the recesses of human knowledge. We can mine diamonds from the caverns of human existence, experience, and observation. But we cannot find wisdom, that wisdom which is heavenly—“from above”—from the one who “is above all” (John 3:31). We have “earthy wisdom” (2 Cor. 1:12). But the Lord alone has heavenly wisdom. He alone is wise (Job 28:23–27; 37:1–42:6).

God’s wisdom wearies us if we try to grasp it through humanly means (Prov. 30:1b). Knowledge of the Holy One cannot be found within (vv. 2–3). Knowledge of the Holy One cannot be obtained by climbing Jacob’s ladder to peek our heads through the clouds (v. 4a). We cannot wrap our minds around the one who “wrapped up the waters in a garment” (v. 4c), who “gathered the wind in his fists” (v. 4b). We can only see flickers of light in the night sky. Streaks of lightning that dance in the storm. And such light—momentary light—comes only through open eyes and hands and hearts, and with faces to the ground.

“Where shall wisdom be found?” (Job 28:12b; cf. v. 20). That is the foundational question of the Wisdom Literature. And Wisdom Literature answers: “The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom” (Job 28:28). This wisdom from above comes only “to those who take refuge in him” (Prov. 30:5b). This wisdom only comes to those who echo John the Baptist’s words about God incarnate: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

So the Wisdom Literature teaches us that the door to the kingdom is open to those whose childlike faith understands how the wisdom of God comes only from the fear of God. But it also teaches us
Why Christians Are Fools

about the gospel, illustrating the wisdom of God in the sufferings of our Savior.

At least that’s how Paul saw it. The knowledge of God’s plan of salvation—the mystery of the gospel revealed (Eph. 1:7–10)—is found in Christ and his cross. Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom (Col. 2:2–3), brings “wisdom from above”—God’s peaceable, gentle, merciful wisdom (James 3:17) down to earth. And such wisdom was demonstrated through Christ’s growth in wisdom and his teaching of wisdom, but ultimately through his sacrificial death.  

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor. 1:18–24)

Christians are fools. That’s Paul’s argument to the Corinthians. That is, those who trust that God through the crucifixion made Christ “who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (v. 30), appear foolish to the unwise—to the overly-wise-in-their-own-eyes—world. Yet he is no fool who abandons human pride and power to find the “secret and hidden wisdom of God” now revealed in “Christ and him crucified” (2:2). The seeming folly of a crucified God is God’s wisdom perfected. That is where wisdom is ultimately found.
Christocentric Wisdom

In his commentary on Isaiah, the church father Jerome wrote, “To be ignorant of the Scripture is to be ignorant of Christ.” Jerome was right. If we know nothing of the Word of God, we will know nothing of the Son of God. Put positively, the more we know the Bible, the better we will know the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Jerome’s saying, however, can be reversed to make just as pointed a point: “To be ignorant of Christ is to be ignorant of Scripture.” For isn’t this the claim of Jesus himself? In John 5:39–40 Jesus rebuked the Pharisees with these words: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.” Life does not come through Bible literacy. Life comes through Jesus. And a right understanding of Scripture comes through knowledge of Jesus and trust in him. As Paul wrote:

For to this day, when [unconverted Jews] read the old [testament], that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. (2 Cor. 3:14b–16)

Such knowledge understands that just as every book of the Old Testament adds light to our understanding of Jesus, so the revelation of God in the person of Christ enlightens our understanding of the Old Testament. Martin Luther put it this way: “We can only read the Bible forwards, but we have to understand it backwards.” Jesus spoke of this forwards-backwards reading of the Word in Luke 24:44, where he taught his disciples how every book of the Old Testament canon—the “Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms”—attested to his person and work, notably his death and resurrection. Most significant for our study is when he mentioned “the Psalms,” referencing the ketuvim or “Writings,” which consists of eleven books, the first being the book of Psalms and the last
Why Christians Are Fools

Chronicles (1 and 2 Chronicles). Also included in “the Psalms” are the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job.12

So, are the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job about Jesus? Jesus says so. And this book aims to show how so. In the preface, I stated my twofold aim: (1) to help you know and enjoy the Wisdom Literature so that you might preach on it more often; and (2) to show you how to preach Christ from this genre. I hope by reading and applying this book your mind will be “opened . . . to understand” (Luke 24:45) perhaps something, if not “everything [!] written about [Christ]” (v. 44) in the Wisdom Literature.

May it be so to God’s glory and the good of the church.
Thank God I didn’t vow to God. Last year I began a decade-long process of reading the Pulitzer-Prize–winning novels from the last century. Yet, after drudging through four more recent winners and finding drab protagonists and meatless plots, I abandoned my aren’t-I-eccentric? ambition for a less lofty but more rewarding one: The Adventures of Robin Hood, The Jungle Book, Robinson Crusoe, Kidnapped, Sleeping Beauty, and Aladdin and other tales from the Arabian Nights. These six children’s classics—beautifully bound, sitting patiently, un-eccentrically atop the black desk in my family room—beckoned me. Take and read. Take and read.

I took and read—six classics in one year.

And what fun it was. Three cheers for plots and protagonists. Hurray for stealing from the rich. Hurray for shipwrecks. Hurray
for talking animals. And hip, hip, hurray Aladdin, my favorite of
the six. Hurray for medieval Arabian (Islamic) folktales!

The Disney version leaves out anything and everything Islamic
(too bad). Yet, like the book, the movie covers Aladdin’s discovery
of the magic lamp, the emergence of an all-powerful genie, and that
genie’s willingness to fulfill his master’s every wish. How exciting!
With the ability to request anything, Aladdin asks for what most
sensible single men would ask: to marry the most beautiful woman
in the kingdom, the sultan’s daughter. Yet he takes a roundabout
way. I would have commanded that genie, “Give me the princess
now!” and let the genie work out the details. But Aladdin asks for
riches to impress the princess’s father. He gets the riches, which
opens the door to the sultan’s approval. Our hero gets the girl. Now,
there’s more to the story (much more), but that’s the first and most
important half of it.

I begin with that folktale because an Aladdin-like moment occurs
in King Solomon’s life. In 1 Kings 3:5 we read not of some magic
genie but of the Lord God Almighty coming to David’s son, the
author of the book of Proverbs.¹ In a dream, God speaks to him:
“Ask for whatever you want me to give you” (NIV). Now, that’s not
“Your wish is my command,” but it’s fairly close.

After praising the Lord for the Lord’s steadfast love, he asked for the
ability to discern right from wrong—for wisdom. He wanted wisdom
so that he might govern his life and his kingdom in a fitting manner.

This so pleased the Lord—that Solomon didn’t ask for long life,
riches, or military victory (or for Pharaoh’s daughter or any other
“sultan’s” daughter)—that God bestowed upon him “a wise and
discerning mind” (v. 12b) and gave to him “wisdom and under-
standing beyond measure . . . so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed
the wisdom of all” (4:29–30a).²
Ship of Fools

We All Need Wisdom

When I was a newborn Christian (for me—age nineteen), I remember the first time I came across James 1:5: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” At the time, I considered wisdom to be the icing on the cake of Christian discipleship. I reasoned, “Oh, things are going pretty well in my Christian life, but now and then I need a bit of wisdom to make an important decision—what girl I should marry; what college I should attend—and so that’s when I’ll ask for it.” That’s when I rub the lamp, if you will. Yet now I realize, as Solomon did much earlier, that I need wisdom like I need oxygen and water—and love.

Isn’t this true for you? We all need wisdom. And not just wisdom in the massive decisions of life but in our everyday relationships with their moment-by-moment choices—at home, in the workplace, in our neighborhoods. Thankfully, our gracious God has not left us to our own devices. He has given us the Wisdom Literature of the Bible, especially the book of Proverbs, where its short and salty Solomonic sayings teach us God’s mind on many matters under the sun.

How do I find a good wife? It’s in there. How do I raise godly children? It’s in there. Why should I deal honestly in business? It’s in there. What am I to do with this tongue, which sometimes likes to fib, gossip, and yell? It’s in there. Why is it important to roll out of bed each morning and work hard? It’s in there. How do I become a wise and respected leader within my community? It’s in there.

Here at the very start of Proverbs (1:2–6), Solomon calls everyone who needs everyday wisdom—the young, the simple, and those already wise—to listen up. Do you need practical wisdom: “instruction in wise dealing” and “prudence... and knowledge and discretion” (vv. 3–4)? Well, then, listen up. Do you need intellectual wisdom: insight into insightful words (vv. 2b, 4b)? Well, then, listen up. Do you need moral wisdom: “instruction... in righteousness, justice, and equity” (v. 3b)? Well, then, listen up. And do you need mysterious wisdom: “guidance” and the ability to understand or
comprehend “the words of the wise and their riddles” (vv. 5–6), difficult or complex concepts and sayings?³ Well, then, listen up. If you want wisdom—practical, intellectual, moral, and mysterious wisdom—well, then, listen now to what God’s Word has to say. Listen to what Proverbs has to say about where to begin.⁴

In the Beginning

If you closed your Bible but kept your mind open, where would you begin? What would be your starting point? What would be your first controlling principle?⁵ Just fill in the blank:

________ is the beginning of knowledge.⁶

Perhaps you would jot down natural intelligence, or acquired intelligence, or experience. Is it the man with the high IQ, or the woman with the elite education, or the kid with street smarts? The Bible says it’s none of the above. Its answer: genuine wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord.

In Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, this is the answer we are given. At the very end of Ecclesiastes, after Solomon speaks of the frivolities of this life, he writes in 12:13: “[This is] the end of the matter. . . . Fear God.” In Job 28, the thematic middle of this narrative poem, the dialogue between Job and his friends is interrupted with a question: “Where shall wisdom be found?” (v. 12; cf. v. 20) What is the answer? “Behold, the fear of the LORD, that is wisdom” (28:28). Then in Proverbs, right from the start, we are introduced to this foundational concept: “the fear of the LORD” (1:7)—that’s the beginning.⁷ If we don’t start here (and stay here) we’ll get nowhere.

You see, the book of Proverbs is not God’s version of Ben Franklin’s Poor Richard’s Almanac—“Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.” Proverbs is not ancient Israel’s version of the ancient Chinese sayings of Confucius. Confucius says, “Silence is a friend who will never betray.” And Proverbs is not just a less humorous version of Murphy’s Law—“Never argue with a
fool, people might not know the difference.” Proverbs has some of the characteristics of these other famous compilations of practical wisdom, but what sets it apart is its teaching that knowledge begins with an appropriate disposition toward God. This is not to say that Proverbs contains no practical truisms, but rather that it sets these truisms upon the foundation of a relationship with a specific God, “the LORD” (Yahweh), the true and living God who has covenanted with Israel. Proverbs claims that the acquisition of true wisdom comes from a right relationship with Yahweh and an appropriate attitude toward him: fear.

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Okay. Fine. That’s the “beginning.” But what then does it mean to fear the Lord? Well, let me give you my definition, which I derived from studying all the references to “fear of the LORD” exclusively in Proverbs. I will give my definition, briefly explain it, and then thoroughly illustrate it. Here’s the definition:

According to the book of Proverbs, “the fear of the LORD” is a continual (23:17), humble, and faithful submission to Yahweh, which compels one to hate evil (8:13) and turn away from it (16:6) and brings with it rewards better than all earthly treasures (15:16)—the rewards of a love for and a knowledge of God (1:29; 2:5; 9:10; 15:33), and long life (10:27; 14:27a; 19:23a), confidence (14:26), satisfaction, and protection (19:23).

So the fear of the Lord isn’t as fearful of a concept as it sounds. (Although, don’t take all the fright out of fear.) It is simply a way (both an Old and New Testament way; see Acts 9:31) of talking about one’s attitude toward God, an attitude of submission, respect, dependence, and worship.  

The Fear of the Lord—Illustrating the Idea
As I thought about illustrating this idea, human-angelic encounters came to mind. In the Bible, what often happened when an angel
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appeared to a human being? What was Mary’s response to the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:29–30)? Fear. And how did the guards who saw the angel that rolled back the stone of the tomb react? Fear. Matthew tells us that they “trembled and became like dead men” (Matt. 28:4). Do you remember what Samson’s father said after the angel of the Lord visited him? He said, in great trepidation, “We shall surely die” (Judg. 13:22). Angelic encounters are fearful, and that is why it’s not uncommon that the first words an angel says are, “Fear not.”

As I thought about those angelic encounters, I thought they might be the perfect illustration of what it means to fear God. The point being: if we fear even angels, mere creatures, how much more ought we to fear God? But since such encounters involved fear mostly in the sense of fearing for one’s life—i.e., “I’m scared”—I decided against that. It gets part of the idea, but not all of it. It touches on the holiness aspect, which demands our respect and awe, but touches little on faith, which is also necessary to “fearing” the Lord.

So, next, I thought about using one of the many examples of encounters with God from the Old Testament narratives. I thought about Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3). I thought about Isaiah’s vision of the thrice-holy God in whose presence the purest of angels veil their eyes (Isaiah 6). I thought about Daniel’s vision, where he describes himself as having “no strength” left in him and falling with his face to the ground (Dan. 10:8–9). I thought about righteous Job’s repentance after he “sees” God in his holiness and sovereignty over creation (Job 38–41), where he says, “I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (42:6).

These divine theophanies—better than the angelic encounters—illustrate the balance of fear (fright of God) and faith (trust and obedience in God). So they work well to illustrate the idea. Yet I have found that the best, fullest, and clearest pictures of “the fear of God” occur in the incarnation, when people encountered God in the flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ. So, it is to the Gospels we turn next.

Although Jesus’s humanity often veiled his divinity, we nevertheless have scenes in the Gospels where the brilliant light—the
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terrible majesty of God—shines through. What does it mean to fear the Lord? Well, let’s look to Jesus and at Jesus. Let’s look at when the Lord became a human and dwelt among us.

Can you think of times in the Gospels when a person shows the fear of the Lord to our Lord, this attitude of submission and respect and dependence and worship? Think about the wise men. When the star of Bethlehem led them to the King of kings asleep in a lowly manger, what did they do? “When they saw the star” resting over the place where the child was, “they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy” (Matt. 2:10). But then, once they entered into the room and saw the child, what did they do? “They fell down and worshiped him” (v. 11). Or think of the various reactions to Jesus’s miracles. After our Lord spoke to the dead son of a widow, “Young man, I say to you, arise,” and the boy sat up and began to speak, how did the mother, the boy, the disciples, and the crowd react? “Fear,” we are told, “seized them all . . .” (Luke 7:14, 16).

Or think of the time when Jesus told Simon Peter and the others to put down their nets once again into the water after a fruitless night of fishing. Reluctantly but faithfully Peter agreed. And then what happened? They caught so many fish that the “nets were breaking” (Luke 5:6). They filled two boats full of fish. Now, how would you respond to such a miracle? Leap for joy? Throw a party? Give Jesus a high-five? How did Peter respond? Look at this! “But when Simon Peter saw it [this miracle], he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord’” (v. 8).

Or think about the time when Jesus’s frightened disciples woke him in the middle of a storm at sea, and he simply rebuked the wind and the waves with his word. He said, “Peace! Be still” (Mark 4:39), and the wind ceased and there was a great calm. Now, there was a great calm outside the boat, but inside there was a new fear, a greater fear—not a fear of drowning or of death but of God. “And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even wind and the sea obey him?’” (v. 41). Or think of when that very question was answered at the Transfiguration—by God! “This
is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (Matt. 17:5). How did Peter, James, and John respond? “When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified” (v. 6).

While each of these Gospel narratives illustrates only part of what is meant by “fear of the Lord,” each frame seen together fills in the picture. Seen together we see fear and faith. Seen together we see Jesus’s greatness, power, and holiness, along with our recognition of lack of greatness, power, and holiness. Seen together we see the attitude of submission and respect and dependence and worship. Seen together we see “the fear of the Lord.”

**No Fear of God Before Their Eyes**

And seen together, we see why today such a sight is unseen. As it was in Paul’s day, so it is in ours: “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Rom. 3:18). For most people today there is no fear of God because, as I see it, they don’t understand who they are dealing with. Jesus has been raised from the dead. Jesus has ascended into heaven. Jesus now sits exalted at the right hand of God the Father. This is the Jesus to whom heaven’s highest creatures fall down and worship (Revelation 4–5). There is no fear of God in people’s eyes today because they have the wrong Jesus before their eyes! They don’t understand who he is, what he has done, and what he will do. They treat him like a pauper when he is the prince, the heir of David’s eternal kingdom, the very God to whom they ought to bow down and adore.

In this way they are like that one thief on the cross next to Jesus who joins the crowd in taunting and teasing our Lord: “If you are the Christ of God, the king, his chosen one, then save me and save us and save yourself.” People are just like that today. They don’t understand who Jesus is. They don’t understand the purpose and the power of the cross. And that is why they won’t heed the words of the other thief, who recognized his sin and his need for Jesus as savior and therefore turned to his thieving buddy and said, “Don’t you fear God, and don’t you understand we deserve to die?” And
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it is why they won’t follow this thief’s example of faith: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

This thief understood his need for Jesus as did former slave trader turned hymn writer John Newton, who wrote:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear . . .

Is that what you need today? Are you ready to begin the way of wisdom? Do you need this amazing grace, a grace which teaches our hearts to fear, to fall before the Lord, even our Lord Jesus Christ, and cry out, “I’m a wretch, I’m blind, I’m lost; cure me, find me, open these eyes”?

The End of Fools

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.” But that’s not the end of it. Proverbs 1:7, which has been the focus of this chapter, has another lesson to teach us, for it continues, “Fools despise wisdom and instruction.” What does it mean to fear the Lord? We’ve spent most of our time thus far answering that question. But there are two other important questions raised by the second half of this verse: first, who doesn’t fear the Lord? Answer: fools! “Fools despise wisdom and instruction.” Second, what does it matter? Fools despise wisdom. So what? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but what is the end of fools? What becomes of those who reject God’s wisdom? Well, that’s what much of Proverbs and some of the rest of Scripture is all about. And that’s what I want to explore with you now briefly.

Seven Deadly Sins

I imagine you’re familiar with the phrase “ship of fools.” It was a common medieval motif used in literature and art, especially religious
satire. One such satire is Hieronymus Bosch’s famous oil painting by that name (c. 1490–1500), which now hangs in the Louvre in Paris. In this marvelous work, which is filled with wonderful symbolism, it shows ten people aboard a small vessel and two overboard swimming around it. It is a ship without a pilot (captain), and everyone onboard and overboard is too busy drinking, feasting, flirting, and singing to know where on earth the waves are pushing them. They are fools because they are enjoying all the sensual pleasures of this world without knowing where it all leads. Atop the mast hangs a bunch of dangling carrots, and a man is climbing up to reach them. Yet above those carrots we find a small but significant detail: a human skull. This is the thirteenth head in the painting, unlucky in every imaginable way. The idea is that these twelve fools, who think all is perfect, are sailing right to their demise. The only pilot on board, the only figure leading the way, is death.

In its own artistic way, the book of Proverbs takes us onboard this ship and shows us what happens when the sins common but fatal to us are the wind beneath our sails. It shows us the destination—what normally happens in this world—to those who reject wisdom.

There are a number of points to the Christian worldview that are hard for a non-Christian to comprehend, but this one, I believe, isn’t one of them. Christian and non-Christian alike know what usually happens to the man who loves himself too much (pride) or eats too much (gluttony) or works too little (sloth) or can’t keep his head (anger). Does this world, even this fallen world, rise up and call him “blessed?” No. Even this world, with its upside-down values, knows it does not profit a man to do whatever his heart and hands and mouth so desire.

For example, if a woman cannot control her tongue and quarrels with everyone, soon she will find that whatever friends she once had are now gone and that even her dear husband has decided, as Proverbs puts it in three different places, that it would be better for him to live on the corner of the roof than in the house with
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her (21:9; 25:24; 27:5; cf. 12:4b). Or if a man thinks that he can
“carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned” (6:27),
that is, if he thinks he can indulge his every sexual fantasy and
appetite void of any consequence, he is a fool: “He who commits
adultery lacks sense; he who does it destroys himself” (v. 32). He
also destroys others—his wife, his family, his workplace, and his
society. Just think about how freeing the sexual revolution of the
1960s has been. Oh, it’s been as freeing to the United States as
Castro to Cuba. Sexual freedom has reaped a harvest of bondage
and destruction: relationships severed, trust forever lost, families
torn apart, and diseases spreading as delicately but as deadly as a
sunrise upon the Saharan sand.

Seven Damning Sins

God’s Word teaches us that sin has temporal consequences, and the
realities of this world confirm this truth. But God’s Word doesn’t
stop here. It also speaks of how sin has eternal consequences: judg-
ment and everlasting separation from God.

Now, you might say, “Well, that’s fine, but I don’t believe in any
of that stuff. I can believe that ‘sin’ (if you want to call it that) exists.
And I can believe that ‘sin’ has certain consequences. But I can’t
believe that ‘sin’ has consequences beyond this life.”

Well, let’s think about this. I don’t know, maybe you’re right.
Maybe you’re right and the Bible is wrong. Maybe you’re right and
Jesus is wrong. Someone has to be right and someone wrong. Either I
speak of hell with great seriousness, or I use “hell” as a swear word.
Either there are eternal consequences for sin or there are not. But
think about it this way. First, if what the Bible says about sin and
its temporary consequences is true (which I think can be proven by
shared experience), then might it be possible that what this book
says about the eternal consequences for sin is also true? Second,
if Jesus is who he claims to be, then might he possibly have more
wisdom than, I don’t know, every Tom, Dick, and Harry you know,
and every Jane, Phil, and Oprah I know?
Greater Than Solomon?

Jesus made many striking claims. Perhaps the most striking was when he referenced the queen of Sheba’s visit to King Solomon. Our Lord said, “The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here” (Matt. 12:42). I love that. Really, Jesus, you are greater and wiser than the wisest man ever to live? Well, what if he is? What if Jesus is, as the apostles testify, wisdom truly and fully and ultimately embodied? What if, as Paul says in Colossians 2:3, “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are hidden in Christ?

Let’s think about this a bit further. Jesus certainly spoke like a sage, the sage *par excellence*:

Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed.
The sick need doctors, not the well.
No one can serve two masters.
The measure you give will be the measure you get back.
Many are called, but few are chosen.
A tree is known by its fruits.
One’s life does not consist in the abundance of one’s possessions.
A city set on a hill cannot be hid.
All that defiles comes from within.
Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.
Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring troubles of its own.
All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves be exalted.
Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses it will save it.
The first shall be last, and the last first.”
Jesus’s proverbial sayings, parables, beatitudes, and many other figures of speech—including his allegories and hyperboles—we might call Proverbs 2.0: conventional wisdom style, unlimited wisdom capacity. Like the sage of Proverbs 1:2–6, Jesus taught practical (Matt. 22:17–22), intellectual (22:23–33), moral (6:1–18), and mysterious wisdom (13:36–40) to the young (18:1–4), the simple (John 9:27–31), and the already wise (3:1–15). And like Israel’s wisdom teachers, he used nature analogies and similes to explain the nature of the kingdom of God. As Alyce M. McKenzie illustrates:

He heard the sound of seeds hitting the earth. . . . He noticed foxes crawling into their holes, birds settling in their nests, and trees barren of fruit. He noticed . . . reeds blowing in the wind, the beauty of lilies, and the behavior of vultures.18

Jesus certainly was a wisdom teacher, surpassing even Solomon. But he was and did more than that: he also lived a life of wisdom, far better than Solomon did. Unlike Solomon (or any Old Testament character), our Lord, in his human nature, perfectly and perpetually feared the Lord. From the cradle to the cross, he walked the way of wisdom. Even denying himself the usual rewards of godliness—long life, a good reputation, a strong marriage, healthy children, material prosperity—he submitted to the wise but inexplicable will of his Father, enduring a crown of thorns, a humiliating death, and spiritual abandonment, so that in his sufferings he might become for us the very wisdom and power of God (1 Cor. 1:24).

Jesus taught wisdom, lived wisdom, and finally was Wisdom.19 Like Lady Wisdom of Proverbs, Jesus invited all to embrace him to find life.20 Jesus—as the bread of life; the living waters; the light of the world; the true vine; the door; the resurrection and the life; the way, and the truth, and the life—invited people to eat, drink, see, bear fruit, open the door, and find eternal life.21
The Beginning and End of Wisdom

So, if it is true that Jesus taught, lived, and was/is Wisdom, then wouldn’t you listen to what he has to say? Wouldn’t you hear and heed his warm words of invitation—“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28)—as well as his merciful words of warning—“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (10:28)?

You see, if you are onboard the ship of fools, don’t be fooled into thinking that just because there’s no pilot, there’s no destination. The beginning of knowledge is the fear of the Lord. But the end of fools (what happens to those who despise such wisdom) is destruction, in this world and in the next.

“Give Me Repentance”
I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter those six children’s classics, one of which is Aladdin and another which is Robinson Crusoe. The climax of the latter story is when Crusoe, shipwrecked on an island, begins to recognize God’s afflicting yet delivering providences in his life. At this time, he starts reading the Bible until finally he comes to the end of himself and prays, for the first time in many years, not for rescue from the island but from his sin. “Jesus, Thou Son of David,” he prays, “Jesus, Thou exalted Prince and Saviour, give me repentance!”

Perhaps that is what you need, and perhaps with God’s kind providential hand he has led you not to the shore of a remote island, but here to read what his Word has to say. Call out to him today—not for riches, not for a beautiful prince or princess, not for success, not for fame—but for wisdom, for wisdom which comes from above and begins with you and me on our knees.