

Old Testament Wisdom

In our studies thus far we have looked at the relationship between wisdom and the created order and the place of wisdom within God's relationship with Israel. We have described God's Wisdom as God's blueprint for His World according to which He created the world and gave order and structure to it. Part of God's creative and wise work was His creation of human beings – created to be His image and to live wisely in His world i.e. in accordance with His plan and design. Human Beings however used their freedom to pursue a different kind of wisdom – an *anti-wisdom* based purely on their experience and in contradiction to what God had said. Thus seeking to become wise independently of God, human beings in fact became fools in God's sight and in reality. Though, in the common grace of God,

God's call of Israel to be His people and His saving work on their behalf had as one of its goals the creation of a wise and understanding people who would be a blessing to the nations among whom they lived. Israel were called to live lives of trust in the LORD and obedience to His Word and thus to be attractive to a watching world. To this end the LORD gave to them His Commandments – the blueprint for their life within the Promised Land and He gave them leaders and teachers whose task it was to apply this Law to every part of Israel's Life. No area of life was considered to be outside of the LORD'S control and thus every area of life had to be seen in the light of His Word. It was in this regard in particular that the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament (books like Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs had an important role to play).

The book of Proverbs is perhaps the best known of these wisdom books and in many ways is the easiest to understand. It presents us with a variety of wisdom forms and a collection of the main lessons that can be deduced by looking at life in God's world in the light of God's Word. From it we learn that the Fear of the LORD is both the beginning and the goal of all true wisdom. (See studies 6, 7 & 8 in this series for a more in-depth look at Proverbs). Even in Proverbs however and certainly in some of the Wisdom Psalms (e.g. Psalm 73) there is a warning that wisdom can all too easily become rigid and harden into a kind of cause and effect view of life which does not take account of the brokenness of our world or the mystery of God's providence. It is to counter balance this kind of rigidity in thinking – the kind of thinking that characterised Job's friends – that books like Job and Ecclesiastes were included in the Old Testament wisdom tradition. It is not our aim in this brief overview to deal with these books in any detail – especially since they have been dealt with in short sermon series available on the website. They together with some of the other material such as Song of Songs and some of the Wisdom Psalms can also be studied in greater depth by

means of *Explore Wisdom* (available from George Whitefield College). Our aim in this study is just to give a brief overview of each.

The Book of Ecclesiastes is sometimes presented as a rather cynical and pessimistic reflection upon life under the sun – a view supported by the translation of the key word *hebel* as ‘meaningless’ (e.g.NIV). The book’s own conclusion (Ecclesiastes 12vs9-14) however suggests a very different point of view. What Ecclesiastes does offer is a realistic look at all of life lived in a fallen world. In such world, despite God’s gracious gift of joy and satisfaction, nothing under the sun can provide that sense of purpose and fulfilment which comes from God alone. Life is fleeting, lived under the shadow of death and even the good things of life are often frustrating or enigmatic. Try though we may we cannot straighten things out or get them to add up. Because the world is fallen the order which God has placed within is world is confused and hard to perceive. The path of wisdom then is to enjoy life, but to remember that we are ultimately accountable to God and that He alone can give a true perspective on the world and ultimate satisfaction to our yearning hearts.

The book of Job contains two primary literary genre – *prose* (1vs1-2vs12; 32vs1-5; 42vs7-17) and *poetry*. The prose section provides the reader with key information about Job’s character and the real reason for his suffering. The poetry section presents a cycle of dialogues between Job and his comforters. In each case Job’s friends present stereotyped wisdom – sayings that are true but are not at all applicable to Job’s situation. This is precisely the kind of trite cause and effect misapplication of wisdom that can be so frustrating and hurtful. Job stands his ground and in the end he is vindicated by God, though not without a challenging encounter in which the LORD reminds Job of His own power and goodness. Thus through his suffering, inexplicable as it seems to Job, Job deepens in his relationship with Lord and finds comfort despite his circumstances. It is important to note that Job 42vs6 is probably better translated “I humble myself and comfort myself upon the ash-heap.” The suffering of the righteous remains a mystery – but it is used by God for the good of those who will remember who He is and trust Him regardless of their situation.

Song of Songs is a beautiful poem in celebration of human love and intimacy and uses a wide variety of settings and metaphors to capture both the beauty and the mystery of this most precious of human relationships. It is forthright without being crude or explicit and reminds the reader that the LORD celebrates and rejoices in every appropriate and godly relationship between a man and woman. The song however also warns against impatience in relationships or the idolization of love. In its wider context the book can also be seen as an illustration of the joy and loyal love that the Lord has in and for His people as Paul reminds His readers in Ephesians 5. Indeed as we shall see in the following studies the ultimate fulfilment of all wisdom is to be found in Jesus and the truly wise person is the One who recognizes that in Jesus God is restoring order to His world and giving wisdom to His people.