

What Can We Do?

Wisdom literature? Just what we need. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job will all tell us just



Michael K. Olmsted

what we need to know so we can live the good life, enjoy success, avoid tragedy, and have God at our back every step of the way!

As I examine my life, read the stories of the Old and New Testaments, and study the life of Jesus I discover that living is not easy, circumstances are not predictable, and growing in faith cannot be reduced to a simple equation of gaining enough points to take home the trophy. Proverbs is not a spiritual Dale Carnegie success book. It confronts the topics of evil, spiritual maturity, suffering, life's meaning, and the way to be God's kind of person in a complex world.

Proverbs uses a pattern of couplets or contrasting statements called parallelism that stimulate our thinking. Verse 1 is a perfect example: mortals make plans, but the Lord answers by the tongue. There is an obvious difference between our limited knowledge and what the God of creation knows. God knows ultimate reality, and God understands the limits of our knowledge and motivations.

I have known individuals who approach the Bible as a mystical book that contains hidden secrets and keys to the future that only a select few will discover. I have also known some who believe if we keep the rules and maintain pure theology we will be in the "winner's circle" at the end of this age. The writer of Proverbs consistently points us to a life based on faith in God, confronting the daily challenges and moving forward when our knowledge is not perfect. I will never forget the young man who claimed he was waiting for God to reveal his will, but saw no need to do anything until God "spoke" to him. So far as I know, no special revelation ever occurred.

God works in our thoughts and circumstances. When we dare to live by the example and words of Jesus, we discover the wonders and blessings of God's will. The writer lists the most obvious obstacles to a truly spiritual lifestyle: wickedness (v. 4), arrogance (v. 5), evil (v. 6), enemies (v. 7), and injustice (v. 8). That daunting list can overwhelm us with uncertainty and fear.

Why make plans to serve God? Why even try? Can we remember God is greater than the obstacles of this world, that time moves relentlessly on, that a moment is not eternity, that our reality is temporary and God has already set the end date? The writer clearly directs us: "Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established" (v. 3).

Don't miss the key words at the beginning of that sentence. The Hebrew word for "established" refers to something well-founded and secure. When God's purpose, not your own desire, is the basis of your choices, you can trust that God will be at work in your action and the outcome. The timing may not be yours and the results will not always be exactly as you expected. But when your commitment is to God and you desire to be his agent of grace you can know that God's purpose will be revealed. God will be the judge of those who are wicked or arrogant, and your actions can help overcome evil and create peace.

I am finding it harder and harder to watch in-depth news programs these days because of the glaring injustices, lies, selfishness, and violence within our country. We live in a tragically flawed world. The voices of some who claim to follow Christ do not follow biblical faith. Evil is often not answered with God's truth, but with political yammering. Verse 5 warns: "All those who are arrogant are an abomination to the Lord; be assured they will not go unpunished." But there is also a clear and powerful promise in verse 6: "By loyalty and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for, and by fear of the Lord one avoids evil." God does not force us to behave, but as a loving father he offers us a better way, his guidance when the days are frightening, and a new beginning.

In a world too familiar with brutal retaliation in war and violence as a political solution, the writer offers a much different answer: "When the ways of the people please the Lord, he causes even their enemies to be at peace with them" (v. 7). Do your attitudes and actions promote positive changes in relationships and the behavior of those around you? Proverbs pushes us to see beyond our own interests, resentments, and need for restitution. Spiritual values are upside down compared to the world's values. "Better is a little with righteousness than a

large income with injustice."

A recurring theme in Proverbs is the clear contrast between a life based on self-satisfaction, and a life shaped by God's love and grace. We want to know God's will, which too often translates to checking off a mental list of responsibilities or actions and accepting the expected blessings. Surprisingly, God has not published a pay scale or list of bonuses for jobs performed! Even more complicating is the daily challenge to serve God without knowing all the details or receiving timely memos from headquarters when life gets complicated.

We are expected to live as God's children. Israel had laws to keep, yet they faced the same kind of challenges interpreting and applying God's love to life. We have the fuller revelation of Jesus. God gives us the unbelievable freedom to make choices in life, to grow in his grace, to give away his love, to serve him each day, and to grow in faith. God wants for each of us the joys of a spiritually sound life, and, like any truly loving parent, God allows us freedom to learn from both success and failure. God does not manipulate or force us to live as his children. God offers us his love, the incomparable gift, and seemingly asks us to love him back. Only when love binds us together will God begin to bless and change us in the challenges of life.

The wisdom writer, like any effective teacher, uses repetition of principle spiritual truths many times:

- The Lord weighs our spirit (v. 2)
- When we commit our life to the Lord, our "plans will be established" (v. 3)
- "The Lord has made everything for its own purpose" (v. 4)
- It's better to have a little and be a person after God's own heart, than to be rich in things and have no integrity or eternal hope (v. 8)
- The human mind can form clever plans, but nothing can compare to the wisdom of God (v. 9)

When my very young daughter sang her first solo in church, it made me very proud. The true blessing was not how well she did, but that, in spite of her nerves, she was offering her gift to God in worship.

As people of faith, whatever we can do, wherever we go, and whatever we face, we offer our daily living as a gift to God.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.