

## How Shall We Decide?

In Proverbs the persona of wisdom is feminine, as in a beautiful



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directive for living, a companionship that is both a safe shelter and guide for ethical decisions. “Wisdom” is our unfailing companion as God’s people. The New Testament offers

the significant place of wisdom for believers: “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously, and it will be given you” (James 1:5).

Proverbs 2 employs the image of a child growing into an adulthood of wisdom, learned through the experiences of life. “My child” presents the voice of a loving father who desires the best possible life for his daughter or son. Five phrases highlight the actions we must take to live a fulfilling spiritual life:

1) Godly wisdom does not mysteriously infiltrate your emotions and thinking. Rather, it is in the examples and careful instruction of those who teach us that we learn to live as God’s children.

2) The narrator encourages us to listen attentively for wisdom’s voice (v. 2). Proverbs 8:1-8 presents wisdom as a woman calling out in the streets for anyone who will hear and accept her gift. The world will offer its shallow self-serving ideas of wisdom, but we must learn to listen with a heart open to God (v. 2). We equate “heart” with emotions, but the ancient world viewed the heart and mind as one, the core of your being.

3) The child must “cry out for insight, and raise (his/her) voice for understanding” (v. 3). In other words, a life built on God’s love and grace must be intentionally sought after.

4) This deep longing for God and his gift of life is like seeking silver and hidden treasures (v. 4) Jesus used the image of a man seeking “the pearl of

great price” and selling everything he possessed to acquire it as the ultimate goal of life (Matthew 13:45-46).

5) The search for this life-transforming wisdom requires total life commitment. When your life’s longing is to find and worship God, then you will find a wisdom beyond the limited ideas and philosophies of the world.

The contrast shared by the writer and his original readers is between the regional cultural deities of that day and the God who revealed himself again and again to Israel, beginning with Abraham. Only from the “mouth” of God comes “wisdom, knowledge, and understanding.”

This is an inclusive list compared to “wisdom writings” from the ancient world: proverbs, parables, sayings of the wise, and riddles with hidden meanings. Our modern world is crowded with books about spirituality, religions, and philosophies, but only the Bible describes the passion of our gracious God from creation to the conclusion of this physical world.

The English word “fear” does not reflect the original Hebrew which is closer to “trust and adoration or worship” of God. When we discover God and begin to build our living on his love and guidance, what does God do for us? God “stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly, guarding the paths of justice and preserving the way of his faithful ones” (v. 9).

What a list! When you trust life to God you are never left alone in the challenges of this world. This is no promise of a life of ease and prosperity. Instead, God, yes the God of eternity, is your faithful shield and protector.

Proverbs offers the three qualities of living as a child of God: God’s people are fair and honest, their influence is for good, and they speak for those who are vulnerable (Prov. 8:8-16; 31:8-9). These distinctives are repeated by the

prophets of Israel and are emphasized in the words and lifestyle of Jesus.

The “wisdom” of Proverbs is not clever sayings, but a call to obviously different values and actions. Faith in God is never a road to success, but a lifestyle of generosity and compassion based on God’s grace.

We often hear about “childlike faith” in the modern church. “Childlike” does not mean innocence or easy generosity. It means to trust in God when nothing seems to work, when the world is falling apart around us, when some religious voices have no connection to the words of Jesus or his cross.

When Proverbs was compiled the world saw the Jews as strange and even evil because they rejected the world’s religions. Given the tragedies of our world and the many twisted portrayals of what it means to be a Christian in America, what “wisdom” shapes your heart and behavior? Are you a child of God described by the writer of Proverbs as accepting the words of wisdom, living out God’s commandments, and open to learning more from God? (vv. 1-3).

The church world of the United States finds itself in difficult days. Membership and baptisms are down. Harsh political rhetoric comes from some religious authorities. Prosperity theology has replaced compassion, generosity, and ministry to those living in despair.

It is too easy to compare the modern church to the various failures of Israel as they ignored God’s directives to serve him alone and to model compassion and integrity before the watching world. The wisdom writer begins with “my child, if you ... accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you” (v. 1). “If” is a mighty big word when it means to honestly look at yourself, compare your life to the love and grace of God, and choose who you will be in the real world today. As the people of God, we base our decisions in his written word and Christ, “the word become flesh.”