

# WISDOM OF THE AGES

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## WEEK 1: WISDOM UNDEFINED

I'm going to start by saying that I don't know exactly what I'm talking about but that I am going to be talking about it for 6 weeks. You see, I can't give you a simple straightforward definition or explanation of what wisdom actually is. And the wisdom books of the Old Testament give clear notice that wisdom is not an easy concept to find or understand.

The book of Job tells us humans that wisdom exists but that we don't understand the value of it. And, it can't be found on land, sea or sky. You can't buy it and even destruction and death have only heard rumours of its existence.

### **Job 28:12-22**

**But where can wisdom be found? Where does understanding dwell? No mortal comprehends its worth; it cannot be found in the land of the living. The deep says, "It is not in me"; the sea says, "It is not with me." It cannot be bought with the finest gold, nor can its price be weighed out in silver.....Where then does wisdom come from?**

**Where does understanding dwell? It is hidden from the eyes of every living thing, concealed even from the birds in the sky. Destruction and Death say, "Only a rumour of it has reached our ears."**

Then there are the seeming contradictions in two of the wisdom books of the Old Testament.

**Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than**

**rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.  
(Proverbs 3:13-15 NIV)**

**Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.  
(Ecclesiastes 1:17-18 NIV)**

They seem to imply that the blessing of finding wisdom results in the coming of much sorrow and at the end of the day finding it is as futile as chasing after the wind. You can see the problem with talking about wisdom, yet, the words ‘wisdom’ and ‘wise’ are mentioned over 200 times each in the Bible. That suggests that it is something God wants us to find and have. So these six weeks are about trying to find an answer to Job’s questions: Where can wisdom be found and where does it come from? But where to you start looking for something when you don’t actually know what you are looking for? Let’s start with how humanity has tried to find it.

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The dictionary definition of wisdom is a useful starting point. It defines being wise is having or showing experience, knowledge and good judgement about life in general. Wisdom is the quality of having experience, knowledge and good judgement. OK - BUT - are knowledge, experience and good judgement wisdom itself and in life, are these all you need to have wisdom and act wisely?

To give an extreme example. As Christians, is your idea of knowledge, experience and good judgement the same as the ISIS jihadists who use these to wage so-called 'holy war?' You can see that from the simple dictionary definition of 'wise' and 'wisdom', it can come to mean different things to different people in different situations. One of the Wisdom books recognised this millennia ago.

### **Proverbs 14:12**

**There is a way that seems right to a man but in the end it leads to death. (NIV)**

This means that the first place we look for a definition and understanding of wisdom leads us, excuse the pun, to a dead end. How the dictionary defines it leads to people determining for themselves what is wise or what is wisdom in their personal experience and environment. And we can see how this is being worked out in our society today. Human wisdom, based on current knowledge, experience and understanding of what is deemed good judgement, is resulting in the world in general, and our society in particular, losing its moral compass resulting in all the evils we see around us.

And in part, this reliance on human wisdom can be traced back to the various experts in wisdom - the philosophers. Experts because the word 'philosophy' means 'love of wisdom.'" Surely those who loved wisdom and were considered to be among the wisest men of their generations could provide a definition of wisdom. In the western study of philosophy the Greek philosophers Aristotle, Socrates and Plato have a prominent place. There is no doubt they were wise men who spoke and wrote words of wisdom which are still as relevant today as they were millennia ago. Questions they raised about the very existence and nature of wisdom have given the basis

for philosophical enquiry through the ages and this will continue. Yet even in these samples, problems and contradictions arise. Aristotle says, knowing yourself is the beginning of ALL wisdom. Socrates contradicts him by saying we don't understand ourselves. And how can you really know yourself when it was already known that:

### **Jeremiah 17:9**

**The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.  
Who can understand it**

We can see the truth in this statement because the legacy of Greek philosophy led to a succession of philosophers who, today, have challenged every accepted worldview to

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the extent that nobody knows what is true or right any more. When human beings look to philosophy for the meaning of wisdom, we find it becomes something that changes with the times - according to political ideologies, social trends, scientific theories, etc.

But Greek philosophy did point us in the right direction concerning wisdom. Unlike its modern successors, Greek philosophy acknowledged that wisdom had a supernatural element. It was based on a worldview that accepted that wisdom extended beyond a tangible, physical existence. Wisdom was a goddess to both the Greeks and the Romans. Proverbs follows this pattern.

### **Proverbs 1:20**

**Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the**

**public squares; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out, the the gateways of the city she makes her speech.**

**Proverbs 8:1& 4-7**

**Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise HER voice?....I raise my voice to all mankind. You who are simple, gain prudence; you who are foolish gain understanding. Listen, for I have worthy things to say; I open my lips to speak what is right. My mouth speaks what is true.....**

Yet, even if human beings accept that wisdom has a divine source, whether or not you find it still depends very much on what you are trying to find, where you choose to search for it and the ways and means you use to try to get it. Think today of the Haddon Collider looking for the so-called 'God particle'. Think of the questions that this project is expected to give answers to. What is the origin of the universe? How did human existence come into being? Such answers would give a further indication of why things exist as they do and how they operate in the natural world; and at the highest level of enquiry, what is the role, meaning and purpose of human existence in it. The 'Big Bang' theory is actually the search for what constituted wisdom for those living on earth about 5000 years ago.

Scholars are agreed that civilisation began in the Akkadian Empire. The the earliest archeological artefacts with forms of writing have been found there. What is extremely significant is that what has been recorded on the tablets reveal that those ancient civilisations were on a quest for wisdom, which would enable them to understand the origin and meaning of life. What concerned them took different forms among the different cultures of the times, but the basic ingredients of the wisdom they sought were all the same. And, a very interesting fact is that one of the main centres of that civilisation is the first

identifiable geographical place name in the world mentioned in the Bible. Ur was a very important Sumerian city state and was also the birthplace of Abraham.

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So, what constituted wisdom for the peoples of this time. The most fundamental issue was how the world came into being. Time was not an issue then. How, rather than when, the world was created and came into being was uppermost among the sages or wise men of the times. The great empires of that era were Akkad and Egypt and from both we have evidence of their views about creation. The Sumerians, Babylonians and Egyptians all had their own versions. The tablets, the earliest from Sumeria from around 2800BC had one thing in common. They all attributed the creation of the earth and all life forms on the earth to divine activity. Before the time the Bible records began, the Sumerians and the Babylonians also recorded their accounts of the Flood which again involved the activity of their deities. Some scholars believe the book of Job could have originated in this era. Later, belief in the existence of deities led to human trying to please or appease those deities and the oldest religious texts in the world are the Egyptian Pyramid Texts. Emanating from what was deemed right and wrong behaviour towards the gods were the instructions on practical social behaviour attributed to the Sumerian king Shuruppak and the Egyptian Amenemope. Their wisdom sayings are similar to those found in Proverbs. Laws also were formulated and the laws of Hammurabi are similar to many found in the Torah.

Scholars acknowledge that what is contained in all of these writings was the result of the ancient civilisations quest for wisdom. In that case, the quest for wisdom becomes the quest for knowledge and understanding of life in all its forms. From earliest times pagan nations found wisdom among things like the study of astronomy leading to astrology, observations from the natural world, divination, occult practices and interpretation of omens and dreams. People still try to find these kinds of answers by using the ways and means of these civilisations and Christians, too, can become susceptible to them, albeit often unconsciously. Just think of how the ‘signs of the times’ have become a major preoccupation of those trying to predict the end of the world.

It seems from the human ways of searching for wisdom that it can give us only glimpses of it, and it has constantly changed with the passing of time. But, at least, knowing this is a major defect, has led to another way of seeking wisdom. We now know that what we are looking for is the kind of wisdom that will give us a firm and unchanging anchor of belief and behaviour in a rapidly changing world, where stable and settled norms now seem to be things of the past. And the one place where those two things have already stood the test of time is the Word of God. We know this because another ancient people also started with a belief in a divine source of wisdom and were granted a revelation of an alternative route to it. We cannot deny that when the Hebrews came to record the findings of their quest for WISDOM, that some of their material was based on what was already believed about the creation of the world

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and life on earth. But, there were major differences. Instead of complicated stories about the activity of different gods, the Hebrews stated, quite simply:

### **Genesis 1:1**

**In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.**

Creation was attributed to one supreme God and that was the foundation stone of Hebrew wisdom, for we find that wisdom was a part of that creation.

### **Genesis 3:6**

**When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also DESIRABLE FOR GAINING WISDOM, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate it.**

### **3:4-5**

**“You will not surely die,” said the serpent to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and YOU WILL BE LIKE GOD, KNOWING GOOD AND EVIL.”**

This has tremendous implications. Wisdom existed at creation: it was a part of that very creation. In other words, wisdom is nothing less than an attribute of God. That is why there is no exact definition of what wisdom is. Yet, it is something God wants to share with us and this record gives us two clues to understanding it. The first principle of wisdom is that it makes a clear distinction between good and evil. Wisdom was associated with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So from the very moment of creation, wisdom was connected to God's standards of right and wrong. A second implication is that a limit has been placed on our understanding of all God plans for this world. The Fall, raises questions about life which

human wisdom cannot answer. If God is good and has infallible foreknowledge, why did He create Satan in the first place? Then, why did He allow Satan to cause His perfect human creation to sin and to pollute a perfect world with evil? Why does He still allow it to exist millennia later? These questions and others about the divine ordering of life are what scholars call reflective wisdom. We find an example of this in the book of Job which I'll come to later.

Scholars also agree that wisdom has a practical side. Pagans believed that the various means of appeasing the gods would bring health, wealth and happiness to the worshippers though the bestowal of special abilities. But, the next time we encounter wisdom is in Exodus and it is extremely practical. Firstly, God gave the Law, not earthly kings. The words mentioned in the text were the Ten Commandments, which David preached on and which scholars agree are a prime example of practical wisdom. If followed today would revolutionise the world. The Book of Proverbs introduce us to this kind of wisdom. Secondly, human talents and abilities are God-

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given practical manifestations of wisdom. Thirdly, and very importantly, wisdom is expressly connected to the Spirit of God.

### **Exodus 19:5-6**

**Now, if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of**

**priests and a holy nation. THESE ARE THE WORDS YOU ARE TO SPEAK TO THE ISRAELITES.**

**Exodus 28:3**

**Tell all the SKILLED MEN TO WHOM I HAVE GIVEN WISDOM IN SUCH MATTERS that they are to make garments for Aaron, for his consecration, so he man serve me as priest.**

**31:2-4**

**See I have chosen Bezalel, son of Uri, the son of Hur of the tribe of Judah, and I have FILLED HIM WITH THE SPIRIT OF GOD, (WISDOM IN THE KJV) WITH SKILL, ABILITY AND KNOWLEDGE IN ALL KINDS OF CRAFTS - to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship.**

The connection between the Spirit and wisdom is confirmed in Deuteronomy 34:9, when Moses, at God's command, laid hands on Joshua appointing him as leader of the Israelites.

**34:9**

**Now JOSHUA, SON OF NUN WAS FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT OF WISDOM because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the Lord had commanded Moses.**

So, Law, abilities and talents from crafts to leadership were all recognised as aspects of wisdom. By specifically making God the giver of these things, the Hebrews made a very sharp distinction between the sources of their wisdom and that of the pagan nations around them. Bearing in mind that the Israelites had just escaped from Egypt, where for four centuries or more

they had been exposed to Egyptian forms of wisdom, the contrast is truly remarkable.

The only aspect of pagan wisdom in which two Israelites were directly involved, was regarding the interpretation of dreams. The two instances where this ability was directly related to wisdom, notably occurred in foreign courts.

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### **Genesis 41:8**

**In the morning his mind was troubled, so he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but no one could interpret them for him.**

### **Genesis 41:15-16**

**Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.”**

**“I CANNOT DO IT,” JOSEPH REPLIED TO PHARAOH, “BUT GOD WILL GIVE PHARAOH THE ANSWER HE DESIRES.”**

In this case we know that that ability set in train the Israelites movement to Egypt under Jacob, which in turn led to the Exodus under Moses and all that followed. In Daniel’s case, the court was that of Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams had terrified him and Daniel chapter 4 gives the details. We are told in verses 7, 8 and 18 his attempts to have the dreams interpreted.

### **Daniel 4:7-8**

**When the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners**

**came, I told them the dream, but they could not interpret it for me. Finally Daniel came into my presence and I told him the dream. (He is called Belteshazzar after the name of my god, and THE SPIRIT OF THE HOLY GODS IS IN HIM.)**

### **Verse 18**

**This is the dream that I, King Nebuchadnezzar, had. Now Belteshazzar, tell me what it means, for none of the wise men in my kingdom can interpret it for me. BUT YOU CAN BECAUSE THE SPIRIT OF THE HOLY GODS IS IN YOU.**

Imperfect though his understanding of Daniel's God was, Nebuchadnezzar knew He was superior to any god of Babylon. Here again the Spirit plays a role in Daniel's ability. Yet, in spite of knowing this, the king ignored Daniel's wise advice to renounce his sin and wicked rule and so disaster came upon him.

### **Daniel 4:32**

**You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.**

The wisdom lessons from these two examples are clear. It was God working through Joseph that gave Pharaoh the interpretation he needed. He heeded Joseph's advice on the wise course of action it required and Egypt not only survived 7 years of famine, but fed surrounding nations, including Joseph's own family. Nebuchadnezzar ignored Daniel's warning and suffered the consequences until he finally did

acknowledge the sovereignty of God. However, these two episodes were the

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exception, not the rule. God told Jeremiah that His Word took precedence over dreams. God's word rather than dreams is the road to wisdom

### **Jeremiah 23:28-29**

**Let the prophet who has a dream recount the dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?" declares the Lord. "Is not my word like fire," declares the Lord, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces**

All of this means that wisdom itself cannot be easily defined. It can take many forms ranging from reflecting on the meaning of life to the practical means and experiences of living it. It doesn't occur naturally in human beings - although try to tell some of the powers that be that! And although God is prepared to supply us with true wisdom, we have to actively seek it as individuals. It's not a once-and-for-all gift like Solomon had. So these six weeks are really setting off on a quest to discover where wisdom is to be found and what it consists of. The Old Testament wisdom books teach us that it is something that will only grow as our knowledge and understanding of God and our obedience to Him increases and that is a life long process. But, three texts from the wisdom books in the Old Testament start us off on the right track.

**God understands the way to it and he alone knows where it dwells, for he views the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. When he established the force of the wind and measured out the waters, when he made a decree for the rain and a path for the thunderstorm, then he looked at wisdom and appraised it; he confirmed it and tested it. And he said to the human race, “The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.”**

**(Job 28:23-28 NIV)**

**Psalm 111:19**

**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise.**

**Proverbs 1:6**

**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.**

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### **WEEK 2: WISDOM'S SOURCE**

Last week we saw that while the quest for wisdom has been going on since the beginning of time, your view of what wisdom is depends on where you have been looking for it. There is now so much information available about everything that ideas and knowledge changes at so rapid a pace that what is considered wisdom today is superseded by something else almost immediately. Now, no one can deny that the worldly searches for wisdom and what has been regarded as wise ways

of what life should be, has resulted in a better quality of life for many, many people. We just have to think of laws that have protected people from oppression and discrimination; or organisations, whose ethos has saved the lives of millions. But as these illustrations show, human wisdom changes with the times, and often so-called wise ideas come from people whose lifestyles make others question their levels of wisdom. That is why, if we want to try to discover what real and true wisdom is - the kind of wisdom that is relevant to life, through whatever changes happen in society - then we need to look for it in an unchanging source. For Christians that source was revealed when God chose the people of Israel to be His witnesses to the world.

Although we cannot deny that the Israelites had been influenced by the aspects of wisdom that permeated the cultures of the ancient Near East, including that of Egypt where they had lived for 400 years or so, we know that they developed their own unique perception of what wisdom was, where it came from and how it was to be manifested in the ordinary course of their lives. We saw last week that the various avenues we explored could not define what wisdom was or what it consisted of. But once the Hebrews had been guided into a lifestyle system of beliefs and behaviour, distinct from surrounding nations, a greater understanding of the concept of wisdom emerged. Today, the *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (p823) can DESCRIBE wisdom as

***“A way of viewing and approaching life, which involved instructing the young in proper conduct and morality and answering the philosophical questions about life’s meaning.”***

This is what is called ‘practical’ and ‘reflective’ wisdom. Proverbs is an example of the first aspect; Job is an example of the second. You can see from these academic statements that wisdom is concerned with all that we do in life and all that we think about life. And since what we do and think is never static for the whole of our lives, wisdom can be still a pretty elusive thing to get hold of. How, then, do we come to an understanding of it? The Bible is our guide, but we have to accept that what it tells us does not come wrapped up in a neat little manageable package. We have to search for wisdom in the Bible. But it is worth the effort for, although we will never be 100% wise and we will never know all there is to know about wisdom, what we do discover, should enable us to increase our levels of wisdom as we live day by day. ©Greenfield Baptist Church, Llanelli 1

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In order to do that, the first thing we need is the right disposition. That is summed up in the texts I finished with last week.

### **Psalm 111:19**

**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise.**

### **Proverbs 1:6**

**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.**

Normally, when they are mentioned, the focus is on the ‘fear of the Lord’ with ‘fear’ being carefully explained as being in awe of God and giving respect and honour, rather than being

frightened of the Lord. The key issue here is that respect and honour towards God has to come from an individual. The Law and prophecy was given to the tribes and the nation of Israel as a community. Wisdom is always related to the individuals within the community of God's people. Each individual has to make that choice. Will they or won't they respect and honour God? These statements then go on to say that even that choice is only the beginning of wisdom. The word 'beginning' is striking because it indicates the start of a continuous process, not the end of one. Wisdom consists of much much more than a once-and-for-all choice to simply 'fear' God. In order to 'fear' anyone or anything you have to have to be certain it exists. Biblical writers did not question the existence of God. They wrote with the certain belief that God did exist and without that belief in the existence of God, there can be no wisdom. Can that explain why true wisdom is in short supply today, given that our 21st century modern western civilisation is increasingly denying the very existence of God. David mentioned this in another context on Sunday morning and this denial of God's existence seems to be the underlying reason why what is perceived as wisdom is as changeable as the weather in our modern age? Denying there is a source from which all true wisdom springs leaves wisdom at the mercy of humanity's worldview at any given time. As I've said, not all of this is bad, but it has still brought us to the state of the world and society as we find it today.

Respect for God starts by believing He exists. Accepting that as fact means that we have also started on the road to the knowledge and understanding mentioned in the texts. And both come from learning something about God in relation to wisdom. There is no point in looking to God for wisdom unless He Himself possesses it. Job assures us of this.

## **Job 9:4**

**His wisdom is profound, his power is vast. Who has resisted him and come out unscathed?**

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### **Job 12:13**

**“To God belong wisdom and power; counsel and understanding are his.** According to Proverbs, God does not just possess wisdom. Wisdom is an integral part of God’s very nature and character. Wisdom is associated with His power and His understanding, which basically boils down to the ability and the capability to keep what He has created in being and on the right track. Another of Job’s statements helps to to assert why God alone can do this.

### **Job 12:12**

**Is not wisdom found among the aged? DOES NOT LONG LIFE BRING UNDERSTANDING?**

### **Proverbs 8:22-31 says of wisdom**

**“The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was formed long ages ago, at the very beginning, when the world came to be. When there were no watery depths, I was given birth, when there were no springs overflowing with water; before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given birth, before he made the world or its fields or any of the dust of the earth. I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, when he gave the sea its**

**boundary so the waters would not overstep his command, and when he marked out the foundations of the earth. Then I was constantly at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind.**

If, as Job states, wisdom and understanding comes from long life, then wisdom and understanding is found to its fullest extent in God, who is the Alpha and Omega. What these verses are telling us that wisdom was in the mind of God before the foundation of the world. Wisdom was employed in the very making of the world. This, too, is a recurring belief. The connection between wisdom and creation is a theme in the book of Job and a direct connection is also made in Psalm 104:24 and twice in Jeremiah.

### **Psalms 104:24**

**How many are your works, Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.**

### **Jeremiah 10:12 and 51:15**

**But God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding**

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That is also why Paul can insist that creation itself will point to God as the source of wisdom for Paul says that God's invisible qualities are obvious in creation

### **Romans 1:20**

**For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities**

**- his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.**

We too affirm that when we sing

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise.*

So this answers the question posed by Job.

**Job 28:12**

**But where can wisdom be found? Where does understanding dwell?**

True wisdom is to be found in God's revelation of Himself to humanity. Again, this starts with the act of creation itself. Last week, we saw that the first mention of wisdom was in Genesis 3:6

**Genesis 3:6**

**When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also DESIRABLE FOR GAINING WISDOM, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate it.**

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was 'useful for gaining wisdom'. But Adam disobeyed a direct command from God.

**Genesis 2:16-17**

**And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.**

Up until the moment that Adam and Eve ate the fruit of that tree they only had the knowledge of what was good and right and perfect. Eating the fruit gave them knowledge of the opposite. That is why wisdom first consists of gaining the knowledge that will enable us to distinguish between good and evil. And that is an on-going process as Job 28:28 suggests.

### **Job 28:28**

**And he said to the human race, “The fear of the Lord— that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.”**

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Scholars believe the book of Job was one of the earliest writings of the Old Testament and if it did come before what is said in the Psalms and Proverbs, then the foundation of wisdom was already firmly laid, for Job agrees with both texts when he says the fear of the Lord is wisdom. Already too, a clear distinction had been made between good and evil and Job links the shunning of evil to wisdom. Wisdom dictates that choosing good over evil is the way of wisdom. But Isaiah has shown that, left to the choice of human beings that distinction is not always clear.

### **Isaiah 5:20-21**

**Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight**

The changing standards of ethics and morality has led to such a situation today. Denial of the existence of God has led to a

rejection of the standards of right and wrong and good and evil in God's word. Just two examples suffice to illustrate this. Jesus tells us to pay our taxes; there are those who can see nothing wrong in avoiding doing so. They may be acting within the law as it now stands, but in their hearts, which God looks at and judges, they show they have refused to abide by the spirit of the law, which is the basis of all standards of God approved activity.

### **Proverbs 16:2**

**All man's ways seem innocent to him but motives are weighed by the Lord.** CHANGE ON POWERPOINT

### **Proverbs 21:2**

**All a man's ways seem right to him, but the Lord weighs the heart.**

In the case of same-sex marriage, God's order of creation has been completely rejected. What God inaugurated in a good and perfect world is now considered by human wisdom as evil and cruel. So knowledge and understanding of good and evil are the first steps in finding wisdom. But again wisdom has to be judged by who sets the standards of good and evil. God's revelations make clear the fact that the the basic choice human beings make in whatever aspect of life they encounter, is that between a good way forward or a bad way forward. In other words, the choice is between God's standards and the world's standards.

That means that identifying what God's standards are is the next step in finding wisdom. There is no problem in finding what those standards are. David preached on them at the beginning of the year - The Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. Here we have wisdom in a nutshell. From Old Testament times God's laws as given to Moses, are

the standard by which good and evil are to be judged. Moses exhorted the Israelites.

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### **Deuteronomy 4:6**

**Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.”**

Regardless of whether a positive or negative reaction resulted from such witness, the fact remains that observing God’s law is the primary path to finding and understanding what true wisdom is. No one can deny that this exhortation explicitly connects the Law of the Lord to wisdom and understanding. No one can deny either that the witness of observing the law would distinguish the Israelites from the nations around them and give them a reputation as a wise and understanding people. A further assertion of this is found in the Psalms.

### **Psalms 19:7-9**

**The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous.**

### **Psalms 119:97-98**

**Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Your**

**commands are always with me and make me wiser than my enemies**

Here the Psalmist makes clear that the knowledge and understanding of the Law is the way to wisdom and everyone from the least to the greatest intellect has access to them. The words used to describe this law also establishes it on an eternal rock-like foundation. In all circumstances it can be trusted because it is as pure and as righteous as the God it comes from. It enlightens people's understanding of the world around them, even making them wiser than their enemies.

Two further examples serve to reinforce what is said in the Psalms. Before the Babylonian captivity of Judah, Isaiah wrote of God's ultimate plans for humanity.

**Isaiah 28:29**

**All this also comes from the Lord Almighty, whose plan is wonderful, whose wisdom is magnificent.**

Yes, the Babylonians would invade; the people would be exiled in a foreign land, but even this falls within God's plans, which are the products of the magnificent wisdom

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of God. What is remarkable is that 70 years later when the Jews were allowed to return to their own lands, what was given top priority was the reinstatement of the Law of the Lord. This instruction to Ezra was given in King Artaxerxes letter to Ezra

## **Ezra 7:25**

**And you, Ezra, IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE WISDOM OF YOUR GOD, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates—ALL WHO KNOW THE LAWS OF YOUR GOD. AND YOU ARE TO TEACH ANY WHO DO NOT KNOW THEM**

What these few examples show is that the Old Testament writers could not have been more explicit about the connection between God's law and wisdom. The Psalmist meditated on it and it was that attention and study that enabled him to claim that it made him wiser than his enemies. That may not always work for us, but it points us to the fact that reflecting on God's laws and God's ways is the only way to come to wisdom and to increase in wisdom as our knowledge and understanding of God's word takes hold of us.

What we have been talking about is what scholars call 'reflective wisdom'. It is a good and proper thing to reflect on what God is saying to us. But wisdom will only become real to us when we obey the light that we have been given. Intellectual wisdom is not enough. James puts it like this - Faith without works is dead. It is only as we obey and practice the wisdom we have been granted intellectually that wisdom makes us a wise person.

And God also grants the practical skills, abilities and talents to do that. While Ezra concentrated on the reflective side of wisdom, Nehemiah was concentrating on the practical side of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. The faculties and skills of the people employed in this work however, were the successors of those who had first been given their abilities at Sinai.

## **Exodus 35:30-35**

**Then Moses said to the Israelites, “See, the Lord has chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, AND HE HAS FILLED HIM WITH THE SPIRIT OF GOD, WITH WISDOM, WITH UNDERSTANDING, WITH KNOWLEDGE AND WITH ALL KINDS OF SKILLS —**

## **Nehemiah 6:15**

**So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, BECAUSE THEY REALISED THAT THIS WORK HAD BEEN DONE WITH THE HELP OF OUR GOD.**

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As Christians we acknowledge that it is what God has given to us that enables us to make our way in life. We also acknowledge that what God has given us is not to be used selfishly, but is to be used for His glory. Used in the service for others for the glory of God, using a dishcloth is as acceptable to Him as the ability to send someone into space. Jesus’ washing of the disciples feet gives the evidence for this.

The Exodus account shows us that the wisdom with the understanding and knowledge that accompanies it, were used in the preparation for the worship of Yahweh. It is true that all the expertise that was involved was directly related to what would become God’s method of acceptable forms of worship. The story of the Old Testament, however, shows us that the

wisdom God had endowed His people with was turned against Him. The worship of the golden calf was but the beginning of a litany of the misuse and abuse of the people's faculties and abilities.

### **Isaiah 46:6**

**Some pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver on the scales; they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god, and they bow down and worship it.**

The whole catalogue of apostasy and idolatry recorded in the Old Testament shows that even then God's paths to wisdom was rejected by the majority of the people He had chosen to be witnesses to them. And, in the end, that led to tragedy for both the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. In the days leading to the Babylonian invasion, Jeremiah sums up the situation.

### **Jeremiah 8:8-9**

**“How can you say, “We are wise, for we have the law of the Lord,” when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely? The wise will be put to shame; they will be dismayed and trapped. Since they have rejected the word of the Lord, what kind of wisdom do they have**

Jeremiah shows that even those who have God's word waste their wisdom by using it to suit their own ends. Their wisdom has no solid foundation, which Isaiah describes as:

### **Isaiah 33:6**

**He will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the Lord is the key to this treasure.**

Isaiah takes us back to where we began. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And in Proverbs, we have guidance

as to how that would work out in practice..

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## **WISDOM OF THE AGES**

### **WEEK 3: WISDOM IN PRACTICE**

Last week we saw that we can rely on the fact that there is only one true source of wisdom and that is God Himself. Wisdom itself is still undefined but, if we turn to God's word in to the book of Proverbs, we get some further clarification. Now sometimes the weirdest images come to mind. I first thought of wisdom itself as 'Spaghetti junction' in Birmingham. How do you make head or tail of it and for the first encounter how do you get through it or around it? Coming to Proverbs all I could think of was a big box of Smarties. Lots of different colours all with the same centre, but no big chunks to get your teeth into. Not a book for those with serious OCD issues methinks. The only thing to be thankful for is that these are only 900 of the 3000 proverbs Solomon is said to have written. Because it is so 'bitty' and had to be covered in one week, it had to be condensed into a very narrow focus. One commentary on the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament identifies key themes of the sayings in Proverbs. According to his analysis of the Book there are twelve main areas. They are cheerfulness, contentment, decision making, diligence, friendship, generosity, humility, kindness, parenting, purity, righteousness, truthfulness. Following this pattern, however, would have resulted in a very brief word about each and a list of references. But the author did provide a quote which led to the

approach I've taken. The way forward, which builds on what we said last week was a comment by a scholar called Van Leeuwen (1995:326) "This world and all within it are God's, and without cognizance of God the details of life do not harmonize." That is what the ancient Hebrews believed and Christians today, I think, would agree with the Hebrews that the success of wisdom does not simply require a compliance with wise instructions but trust in, reverence for, and submission to the Lord. Since, ultimately, Bible study is about learning more about God, it seemed the best way get an overview of Proverbs was look at aspects of those sayings from God's perspective.

The first 7 verses of chapter 1 are crucial for they show us what God's purpose is in providing us with information about what we need in order to live a life pleasing to Him.

Proverbs 1:1-7

**The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight; for receiving instruction in prudent behaviour, doing what is right and just and fair; or giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young — let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance—for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.**

**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.**

The purposes contained in just these 7 verses indicate that wisdom feeds the mind through knowledge and understanding; controls the tongue, and behaviour through

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prudence and discretion; and results in a life lived on the basis of what is right, just and fair. Just teasing out the list of purposes shows that the book of Proverbs is not just a collection of sayings that make good quotes or are just good advice in certain circumstances. Every aspect of our lives is represented in one form or another in this book. The categories mentioned are one indication of how wide-ranging the Proverbs are. In short, they spell out, in practical terms, the kind of knowledge, understanding and insight that makes a person wise. The 7 verses also show that wisdom can be seen in the practicalities of everyday life. Prudence and discretion are key characteristics in practical terms, but the motivation and governing factor is the ‘fear of the Lord.’

### **Proverbs 8:12**

**I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence; I possess knowledge and discretion.**

Briefly, discretion is the ability to judge the most appropriate thing to say or do in any given situation; prudence is the avoidance of rash actions through taking potential consequences into account. Although originally meant to give guidance to the young - the constant address to ‘my son(s)’ emphasises this - the reference to adding to learning indicates that this is a continuing process designed to bring the young to maturity. As such, the proverbs are timeless and appropriate for every age.

None of this can come to pass, however, without an essential prerequisite foundation. That is **“The fear of the Lord is the**

**beginning of wisdom.”** This too is a thread that runs through the whole book as these verses show

**Proverbs 9:10**

**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.**

**Proverbs 14:26**

**The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, turning a man from the snares of death.**

**Proverbs 19:23**

**The fear of the Lord leads to life: Then one rests content, untouched by trouble.**

**Proverbs 28:14**

**Blessed is the man who always fears the Lord, but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble.**

The wisdom of Proverbs addresses many practical aspects of life which are equally applicable to both secular and spiritual conduct, but these verses clearly state that this wisdom can only be truly realised when it recognises its divine source, a point made clear in Proverbs 3:3-5.

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**Proverbs 3:5-7**

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil.**

That means that we have to make choices. Chapter 2 spells this out for us. Wisdom is given a voice and complains that the simple (those who can, but refuse to learn), the mockers and the fools are content to remain as they are and the consequences of their choice is attributed to not fearing the Lord. Those consequences are summed up in Proverbs 8:33-36

### **Proverbs 2:22**

**How long will you simple ones love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge?**

### **Proverbs 2:29-32**

**Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord. Since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways, and be filled with the fruit of their schemes. For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them.**

### **Proverbs 8:33-36**

**For whoever finds me finds life and receives favour from the Lord. But whoever fails to find me harms himself; all who hate me love death.**

Wisdom is thus a serious virtue with most serious consequences. We have to make the choice about what to do with it. On the one hand, there is the path of wisdom, which leads to life in all of its dimensions; on the other hand, the path of folly leads to death in all of its aspects. On this basis, it doesn't seem an exaggeration to say that how a person views and responds to wisdom is literally and spiritually a matter of life and death. It was, and still is, therefore, essential to gain knowledge and understanding of what the two paths entail in

order to make an informed choice as to which one to follow. The Israelites in Solomon's day and Jews to the present day believe that eternal life or death is determined by God's acceptance or rejection of how they lived their lives. That would be judged on whether or not the good they did or were in life outweighs the bad aspects. Proverbs was written to address this perspective, but, at the same time, its practical maxims and advice still apply even when we acknowledge that we now have Christ to vouch for us. For example, we still have to believe Proverbs 30:5-6 which states:

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### **Proverbs 30: 5-6**

**Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.**

We are only too aware of how God's word has been distorted throughout history to suit the agendas of various sects and cults, a fact that seems even more evident today. That is why we need a reliable 'text book' to give us the right kind of education. Proverbs, as we saw, is intended to educate the young and its contents covers the whole range of human experience from personal behaviour to social institutions. That means that wisdom is the gateway to building up moral character, which in still is in Jewish thought at least, the greatest goal of education. And this is especially the case in regard to the wisdom education in God's word. Proverbs places on this the highest value possible - Silver, gold, rubies, priceless, rare and beautiful treasures.

### **Proverbs 2:2-6**

**...turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.**

### **Proverbs 3:13:15 and 8:10-11**

**Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you can desire can compare with her.**

### **Proverbs 8:10-11**

**[Wisdom says] Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her.**

### **Proverbs 4:7**

**Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding.**

### **Proverbs 16:16**

**How much better to get wisdom than gold, to choose understanding rather than silver.**

### **Proverbs 24:3-4**

**By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures.**

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We are all aware today of how little value is placed on God's word. Yet we also relate what Solomon says to Paul's doxology in Romans 11:33.

### **Romans 11:33**

**Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!**

Proverbs is not decrying other forms of education. Solomon used all the knowledge and skills that he and his people had during his reign. What is being said here is that education based on God's word ultimately has a value over and above anything a secular education can provide. As a part of God's word, Proverbs clarifies what practical wisdom consists of, and many of the sayings give clear cut opposites upon which to base our choices. These include - Life and death; good and bad; truth and lies; righteous and wicked; wise and foolish; rich and poor; thrift and waste; discipline and indiscipline. These opposites explicitly show us the ethical and moral path which is God's way and another path which leads to self-centredness, self-indulgence and ultimately, self-destruction. In other words, all our actions, attitudes and values about all aspects of life come under the spotlight in Proverbs.

Proverbs gives us the basis upon which we can judge our actions, attitudes and values because the sayings are the result of careful observation of general patterns of acts and consequences in life as it was lived. And, when we read through Proverbs we can see that the same pairs of opposites still exist today. etc. It would be impossible in one talk to cover all of these individually. I would simply be giving you a list of

the relevant verses. What seems to be more important is, since wisdom dictates that all our actions, attitudes and values are under God's scrutiny, identifying what God does and does not approve of should be a priority. Proverbs helps us to do that by setting out very clearly the contrast between God's way and man's way. There are also serious warnings involved in making that choice. The most familiar is Proverbs 14:8 but all these verses are summed up in Proverbs 19:21

### **Proverbs 14:8 & 16:25**

**There is a way that seems right to man, but in the end it leads to death.**

### **Proverbs 16:2 & 21:2**

**All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the Lord. Proverbs 16:9**

**In His heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps. Proverbs 16:33**

**The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.**

### **Proverbs 17:3**

**The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart.**

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### **Proverbs 27:1**

**Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.**

## **Proverbs 19:21**

**Many are the plans of a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.**

These verses show us that God's way will inevitably prevail in spite of the wrong choices human beings make or plan against Him. We also see that our practical choices determine our inner character. We will all make mistakes. We will all make wrong or bad choices. The litmus test will be whether or not those choices were made in deliberately rejecting or disobeying what we knew to be God's way of dealing with the situation or circumstance we are faced with. We are reminded too that it is not the action or attitude that comes under judgement, but the motivation behind them, taking us back to the text that God's does not judge by the outward appearance but by the what is in the heart and mind. Proverbs endorses this by showing that God is not just the Source and the Giver of wisdom, He also sets the standards by which wisdom is to be measured and He monitors a person's progress, or lack of it, regarding wisdom.

## **Proverbs 5:21**

**For a man's ways are in full view of the Lord, and he examines all his paths.**

## **Proverbs 20:27**

**The lamp of the Lord searches the spirit of a man, it searches out his inmost being.**

And that brings us to the practical side of things. There is no doubt that many times we genuinely may not know or be unsure of exactly what decision or what action we should take in some circumstances. That is part of the walk of faith. What God does expect, however, is that we walk in the light of what

He has clearly revealed to us. As I've said, to cover all that said is impossible. But we can take guidance from the texts that state God's perspective.

**Proverbs 15:8-9 give us the overview.**

**The Lord detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him. The Lord detests the way of the wicked, but he loves those who pursue righteousness.**

We, then, have a general list of what constitutes wickedness in Proverbs 6:16-19. It is obvious that pride, lies, violence and inciting strife and both planning and executing evil and malicious actions against others underlie all other forms of wrongdoing.

**Proverbs 6:16:19**

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**There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him:**

**haughty eyes (pride), a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness that pours out lies, and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.**

Many of the proverbs then give specific examples of these things. Examples of these include the perverse heart (11:20), the crafty man (12:2), lying lips (12:22), thoughts of the wicked (15:26), acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent (17:15) . All of these are the result of an inner disposition and motivation, but Proverbs also include some

very concrete situations. I've chosen these ones, which we may think don't really apply to us, but the principles underlying them are still at work in our practical lives today. What was interesting was that justice and weights and measures have the same symbol

### **Proverbs 23:10-11**

**Do not move an ancient boundary stone or encroach on the fields of the fatherless for their Defender is strong; he will take up their case against you.**

### **Proverbs 22:22**

**Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court for the Lord will take up their case and will plunder those who plunder them.**

### **Proverbs 11:1, 20:10, 23**

**The Lord abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are his delight. Differing weights and differing measures, the Lord detests them both. The Lord detests differing weights, and dishonest scales do not please him**

We many not need to heed the prohibition on moving boundary stones, which could affect a person's whole livelihood in ancient times; but we are all familiar with companies and organisations 'moving the goalposts' to prevent wronged people getting what they are entitled to. And we are all familiar with the saying that there is one law for the rich and one for the poor. The restrictions now on who is entitled to legal aid is a further example of how the poor can be denied access to justice. Nowadays, we can leave fraud and deception using false weights and measures subject to criminal proceedings. But what about the ethics or morality of making goods smaller or giving less, yet still using the same size of packaging and

charging the same price and even more in some cases. I need two boxes of maltesers to give me the same amount I used to get out of one!

By revealing through the wisdom of Proverbs, what He disapproves of, there is no excuse for pleading ignorance of what is required of us. The constant exhortations to heed instruction, be knowledgeable, get understanding and be prudent and discreet

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means that any ignorance comes not from a failure of intellect, but a refusal to accept the wisdom of God and/or a deliberate choice to ignore and reject it. That is the negative side of wisdom and choosing to be the kind of people, who do the things God disapproves of is what Proverbs calls folly. As we have seen, nothing escapes God's notice and ultimately, the wicked will pay for their folly.

### **Proverbs 16:4**

**The Lord works out everything for his own ends - even the wicked for the day of disaster.**

But we need to show that wisdom has a very positive side too. Chapter 2 sums this up. Seeking and heeding wisdom has this advantage.

### **Proverbs 2:9-11**

**Then you will understand what is right and just and fair - every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you.**

### **Proverbs 3:4**

**Then you will win favour and a good name in the sight of God and man.**

### **Proverbs 8:17**

**(Wisdom says) I love those who love me and those who seek me find me.**

### **Proverbs 10:29**

**The way of the Lord is a refuge for the righteous, but it is the ruin of those who do evil.**

Throughout Proverbs there are so many examples of the ways in which God is on the side of those who choose the path of wisdom, although this does not guarantee that Christians will always be protected from harm or injustice in this world. Proverbs too has a word for that in words that might be more familiar from the New Testament.

### **Proverbs 20:22**

**Do not say, “I’ll pay you back for this wrong!” Wait for the Lord and he will deliver you. (Romans 12:19 - ‘Vengeance is mine’ says the Lord)**

### **Proverbs 25:21-22**

**If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you. (Romans 12:20)**

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The use of Proverbs in the New Testament is a testimony to their timeless and enduring nature. So the contents of the Book are not ones that are absorbed or learned at one time or are relevant only at one time. Proverbs is a book worth revisiting time and time again for, what Solomon wrote in the first 7 verses of the book were repeated in another form when Paul wrote to Timothy.

## **2 Timothy 3:16**

**All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.**

Proverbs is the book that does exactly that in the practical matters of life.

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### **WEEK 3: WISDOM WASTED**

Another reason why wisdom cannot be defined is because possessing wisdom does not necessarily make you wise. Sounds Irish I know, but Solomon is a prime example of why this is true. Somebody, I don't know who, has said that two of the saddest words in the English language are "If only...." If only I had or hadn't done thought or said....how different things would have turned out. And, if only King Solomon had practised what he preached, this talk would not have this title. Think of what you know about Solomon. Probably that he was David's second son and his mother was Bathsheba. That he ruled one of the largest kingdoms of the time and was fabulously wealthy. Also, when God asked him what he would

like as a gift, he chose wisdom - and Solomon got it in what we would call these days - a lump sum. You would also know that he built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem for God. Pushed a bit further, you would be able to tell me that three of the wisdom books, Song of Songs, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are attributed to him.

You've got to admit that those are a pretty impressive set of credentials. From the accounts in Kings and Chronicles, certainly, on the surface you could look back on Solomon's reign as one of the most spectacular in Israel's history. You would assume that Solomon's wisdom would have ensured that all he had received from God would have laid the foundations of a kingdom and a dynasty that would have lasted for generations, if not centuries to come. I hate to disillusion you, but that's not the way things turned out. Today, Solomon serves as a major warning, especially to Christians, that it is possible to waste God-given wisdom. One writer has summed him up in 5 words. "He loved wisdom, wealth and women." Are the alarm bells ringing yet? Well, before they deafen us, let's go back to the beginning for Solomon did start off the right way.

### **1 Kings 3:9-10**

**SO GIVE YOUR SERVANT A DISCERNING HEART TO GOVERN YOUR PEOPLE AND TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN RIGHT AND WRONG. FOR WHO IS ABLE TO GOVERN THIS GREAT PEOPLE OF YOURS?"**

**The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this**

God was so pleased that in the following verses we are told He also gave Solomon what he had not asked for - riches and honour so that in his lifetime he would have no equal among kings and his kingdom would be at peace with all. But there

was a condition attached. All God's promises were dependent on Solomon keeping His law.

**3:14**

**And if you walk in obedience to me and keep my decrees and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life.”**

1 Kings 4:30.31

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The result was an unsurpassed reputation among all the nations of the region. Solomon's wisdom, in particular, exceeded all the kinds of wisdom that we mentioned a couple of weeks ago. His fame spread far and wide.

**Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than any other man.....and his fame spread to all the surrounding nations.**

**1 Kings 4:33**

**He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.**

Those who came brought with them very expensive gifts so that Solomon's wealth increased greatly so that by chapter 11 we learn that Solomon had 1400 chariots and 12,000 horses. Silver was as common as stones in Jerusalem. Such was his

reputation that the Queen of Sheba came specifically to “test him with hard questions (10:1)

Her verdict is given in 10:6-9

**She said to the king, “The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. How happy your people must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel**

The Queen of Sheba astutely gave credit for Solomon’s wisdom and wealth to God. She assumed Solomon’s subjects could not be anything but happy having such a king. So where did it start to go wrong? How did Solomon waste what he had been given and what were the consequences?

In the first place, while there is no doubt that Solomon possessed wisdom, the records show that this was paraded before the ruling elites and, whether consciously or unconsciously, it had become a matter of pride. Solomon’s writings publicised his wisdom and it also was demonstrated in conceiving, planning and building grandiose structures. The descriptions given of the building of the temple, his palaces and even ships are evidence of the breadth and depth of an intellect that went far beyond its times. The descriptions also make clear that such major projects required unlimited manpower and finance. Expensive gifts and the tribute paid by subject peoples was nowhere near enough to pay for Solomon’s projects and support the wealthy lifestyle

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that became the envy of every other ruler of the time. Unfortunately, Solomon did not heed his own advice in **Proverbs 3:9**

**Honour the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; they your barns will be filled to overflowing and your vats will brim over with new wine.**

It is true that Solomon honoured the Lord with the building of a magnificent temple, but that involved no personal sacrifice of resources. His people paid the price. If only Solomon had heeded **“Do not move an ancient boundary stone or encroach on the fields of the fatherless.” (Proverbs 23:10)**. He did exactly that for he divided his territory into 12 districts. Given that the division of the land went back to the Israelites entry into the Promised Land, changing the boundaries eliminated all vestige of ancestral, tribal inheritances. Again you can imagine how the people, aware of their history and heritage reacted to this. Insult was added to injury for Solomon ordered that each district had to supply all the needs of his court for one month. No doubt that included supplying the needs of the governors households as well.

### **1 Kings 4:7**

**Solomon also had 12 district governors over all Israel who supplied provisions for the king and the royal household. Each one had to provide supplies for one month in the year.**

When you take a look at what Solomon’s DAILY needs were, you begin to get some idea of what was quickly to become an intolerable burden on ordinary people. Thirty cors of flour

amounted to approximately 5 1/2 tons and 60 cors about 11 tons and The burden would have been especially grievous if many of their able bodied people were in forced labour the month these supplies had to be provided.

**Solomon's daily provisions were thirty cors of the finest flour and sixty cors of meal, 23 ten head of stall- fed cattle, twenty of pasture- fed cattle and a hundred sheep and goats, as well as deer, gazelles, roebucks and choice fowl. (1 Kings 4:22-23 NIV)**

Here was a man who had been given

**1 Kings 4:29**

**....wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore.**

Justifiably, I think we can ask. Why, if Solomon possessed such great wisdom, could he not see that his demands would eventually lead to.

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But it gets worse. If only Solomon had heeded all his advice about the treatment of the poor and righteousness and justice, he would not have enslaved all the non- Israelite peoples in his territory. He did not make slaves of the Israelites because that was forbidden in the Law. What he did do was conscript Israelites to work for 4 months of the year in Lebanon, which meant leaving behind their families and their livelihoods. You can just imagine the disruption this would cause in a rural community especially at planting and harvest times. It is

obvious that forced labour of this kind was little different to slavery.

**Solomon conscripted the descendants of all these peoples remaining in the land —whom the Israelites could not exterminate —to serve as slave labor, as it is to this day. 22 But Solomon did not make slaves of any of the Israelites; they were his fighting men, his government officials, his officers, his captains, and the commanders of his chariots and charioteers. 23 They were also the chief officials in charge of Solomon’s projects—550 officials supervising those who did the work**

**(1 Kings 9:21-23 NIV)**

**King Solomon conscripted labourers from all Israel— thirty thousand men. 14 He sent them off to Lebanon in shifts of ten thousand a month, so that they spent one month in Lebanon and two months at home. Adoniram was in charge of the forced labor**

**(1 Kings 5:13-14 NIV)**

If only Solomon had heeded his own assertions that consequences would follow foolish behaviour he would have been able to see warning signs. He didn't, but the Lord did and initiated the events that would lead to disaster.

**Kings 14:26-27**

**The Lord had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them. And since the Lord had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash**

## **1 Kings 11:29-31 NIV**

**About that time Jeroboam was going out of Jerusalem, and Ahijah the prophet of Shiloh met him on the way, wearing a new cloak. The two of them were alone out in the country, 30 and Ahijah took hold of the new cloak he was wearing and tore it into twelve pieces. 31 Then he said to Jeroboam, “Take ten pieces for yourself, for this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘See, I am going to tear the kingdom out of Solomon’s hand and give you ten tribes**

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Jeroboam was a protege of Solomon, who had seen his potential and had made him one of his officials. So Jeroboam saw, first hand, the impositions placed on his subjects. It was such actions that sowed the seeds of the social inequality, injustice and oppression of the poor that the prophets would later loudly condemn. 1 Kings 11:26 tells us, that among others:

**....Jeroboam son of Nebat rebelled against the king. He was one of Solomon’s officials.....**

Solomon’s wisdom was wasted on the situation he had created to such an extent that God intervened. The result was that 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel followed Jeroboam into rebellion and set up a rival capital in Samaria. That was the origin of the Jewish-Samaritan hostility. The twelve tribes that David had welded into a united nation was destroyed by Solomon’s waste of wisdom. After Solomon’s death the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah found themselves in constant conflict either with each other or their neighbours. Solomon’s legacy for 10 of the tribes

was a bitter one, for the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom Israel, obliterated all trace of the original 10 tribes of Israel. That is why they are called the lost tribes to the present day.

It can be seen from this that great wisdom, insight and understanding does not guarantee they will be used wisely and Solomon is a case study of how God-given wisdom and abilities can be wasted, when self-interest takes over. But over and above even these wrong turnings was another feature of Solomon's reign that left an even more toxic legacy. If only he had heeded all his warnings about women who lead young men astray and adultery, Solomon's love of women would not have sealed the fate of both kingdoms. If only he had remained with the wife of his youth as he mentioned in Proverbs 5:18, which he celebrated in Song of Songs, disaster could have been averted.

In the idyllic picture in Song of Songs of first, pure love between a young couple, it is suggested that this represents the love Solomon had for God in his youth. That may be possible, but even the rabbis who drew up the final Hebrew canon debated the inclusion of this book because it does graphically portray human sexuality. A more plausible reason for its inclusion is that Jews had a holistic view of human beings. Greek philosophy elevated the soul and considered the body just a mere casing for the soul. Hence, any focus on bodily activity was relegated to a lower plane of existence. By contrast, the Jews believed that human beings in their entirety were created by God and human sexuality was part and parcel of that creation. Also, while God had pronounced the verdict of good on His natural creation, He had given the verdict of 'very good' on His human one. From the perspective of God's perfect creation, this book does have a place in Scripture. A

further symbolic reinforcement of this view is that the setting of the Song of Songs is a garden. So, whatever spiritual allegory we may attach to this book, the fact remains that in relation to

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Solomon we cannot ignore the obvious level of meaning in the writing. Especially because we are told that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. (1 Kings 11:3)

Given the extent of Solomon's international alliances and influence, this would have been considered appropriate in the ancient world. We cannot impose our moral standards on a 3000 year old culture and we find that God did not make His judgements on the basis of the number of wives or concubines Solomon had. What he was judged on was inter-marriage with those under God's specific prohibition, and as a consequence, what he permitted these wives to do.

### **11:1 & 3-5.**

**King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter - Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. THEY WERE FROM NATIONS ABOUT WHICH THE LORD HAD TOLD THE ISRAELITES, "YOU MUST NOT INTERMARRY WITH THEM, BECAUSE THEY WILL SURELY TURN YOUR HEARTS AFTER THEIR GODS. Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love....and his wives led him astray. AS SOLOMON GREW OLD, HIS WIVES TURNED HIS HEART AFTER OTHER GODS ...HE FOLLOWED ASTORETH THE GODDESS OF THE**

## **SIDONIANS, AND MOLECH, THE DETESTABLE GOD OF THE AMMONITES**

Chapter 11:3-13 spells out Solomon's downward spiral into idolatry and apostasy. He is the first of the long list of kings in the Old Testament of whom it is said **'he did evil in the sight of the Lord.'**

**1 Kings 11:6**

**So, Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he did not follow the Lord completely, as David his father had done.**

And it was for David's sake that God did not bring about the division of the kingdom until after Solomon's death.

**1 Kings 11:12-13**

**Nevertheless, for the sake of David, your father, I will not do it during your lifetime, I will tear it out of the hand of your son. Yet I will not tear the whole kingdom from him, but will give him one tribe, for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen.**

When we looked at the records of the writing prophets we saw that what had been introduced in the reign of Solomon became widespread throughout both Israel and Judah. In the end, it was the practice of idolatry and apostasy that led to the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests. In the process, the Jews were reduced a a remnant of the nation David had brought together.

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Looking at Solomon's reign from these perspectives, we can clearly see that wisdom was wasted on him. Last week we saw in Proverbs that he had very perceptive insight into what was

right and wrong and could discern the paths and things that would lead to a life well-lived for God. If only - for Solomon - led to what is regarded as his reflections in later life. The man who would have been considered to have had everything in life ends up by saying.

### **Ecclesiastes 1:2**

**“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”**

There is some justification for saying the book was written towards the end of Solomon’s life because the first 8 chapters are a backward look which bring to the surface what are seen as life’s inconsistencies. In the first chapter, in spite of his labour; in spite of his observations of the natural world; in spite of his pursuit of wisdom and his study of life; in spite of growing and increasing in wisdom more than anyone else on earth; and in spite of experiencing much of wisdom and knowledge. Solomon writes.

### **1:8-9**

**All things are wearisome, more than one can say...What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.**

### **1:14**

**I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.**

**And about the wisdom with which he had been so richly endowed, he says**

### **17-18**

**Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after wind.**

The following chapters describe how he chased after pleasure (2:1)’ undertook great projects - buildings, parks and gardens with reservoirs (2:4-6); owned slaves and had others born in his household(7); had more livestock than anyone in Jerusalem before him (7); amassed silver and gold, royal treasures and territories (8); males and female singers and a harem (8). He became greater than anyone before him and retained his wisdom (9). In fact,

## **2:10**

**I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.**

Yet even when he considered wisdom, he ended up hating life and all the work he had done. Wisdom would be forgotten and he would eventually have to leave all he had

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behind. Even what comes from the hand of God to both the man who pleases Him and the sinner, is regarded as meaningless. Various comments are made about time, work, wealth, evil, oppression, death in the following chapters, with the same sad conclusion - all is meaningless. From chapter 9 to 11, he tries to find an explanation for all that he has come to know and experience through wisdom. However, he finds that ultimately human wisdom is so limited that people are unable to see any overall, consistent purpose in their personal life experiences. God has hidden His purposes and, at the end of the day, humans are no better than animals (3:18-22), for at death they all go to the one place. Qoheleth’s view come from the perspective that God is transcendent, completely other, separated from the human world by an infinite gulf. God’s

sovereignty is recognised but it is hidden to the extent that it is beyond human understanding. It would seem that the Teacher's view came from the realisation that even the great wisdom that he possessed was too inadequate to reach into the mind of God. Because, the knowledge and understanding of the mind of God was denied him and God had not revealed to him the meaning and purpose of life, everything else became meaningless. If only Solomon had realised that knowing God does not come from great intellectual wisdom, but by obedience to His commands, as God had stipulated at the beginning of his reign and after the dedication of the Temple, Solomon would not have ended up as a disillusioned old man. Yet, in spite of all his pessimistic reflections, by chapter 12, having exhausted his thoughts and musings, he acknowledges that the sovereignty of God is still paramount.

### **Ecclesiastes 12:1 and 13-14**

**Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.....Now all has been heard; HERE IS THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER: FEAR GOD AND KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS, FOR THIS IS THE WHOLE DUTY OF MAN. For God will bring every deed into judgement including every hidden thing, whether good or evil.**

Sadly, perhaps for the man who had everything, these are simply words of resignation to the inevitable thought of having to account for his life before God at judgement. But we can end on a positive note. You can see how Solomon's misuse of wisdom serves as a warning and antidote to any pride, arrogance or over-confidence in believing we possess greater wisdom than others, because of our knowledge and understanding of God's word, or experience of God in our Christian lives.. And, Solomon can also be credited with

leaving us with the words of wisdom that will prevent that happening. FEAR GOD AND KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS FOR THIS IS THE WHOLE DUTY OF MAN. That, indeed, is the path to true wisdom.

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## **WISDOM OF THE AGES**

### **WEEK 5: Wisdom's Limits**

In view of what has happened in America and Tunisia in the last couple of weeks, this talk does seem timely. We all know the story of Job. It's the story of a man who had everything but lost it and couldn't understand why because he had led a completely blameless life in the sight of God. Unlike Solomon, however, who had everything, but ended up still believing in God, but also believing life and everything in it is meaningless, Job persisted in trying to find answers to his problems. In one sense, Job is the antidote to Solomon's pessimism. Instead of giving up on life and God, Job reflects deeply on his situation. It's a personal opinion, but I believe that the inclusion of a book like Job in the canon and classing it as wisdom literature is God giving us permission to explore how we deal with a situation giving rise to our questions when life has delivered a bitter blow, when we feel that we or others have done nothing to deserve it; and, especially, if we have done everything in our power to avert a devastating crisis. For me, what is probably one of the most valuable lessons from the wisdom of Job is that it gives us the right to reflect on and ask hard questions, but at the same time, it requires us to be willing to accept that we will not get all the answers we seek, because none of us has the mind of God.

The first thing we are faced with is the fact that tragically bad things happen to good people. As David mentioned on Sunday morning, questions being asked by that Charleston congregation, by those holiday makers in Tunisia and to us in various ways nearer to home, include Why? and Why me? If God is a good, kind, loving God, why has He let this happen to me? Why, at least doesn't He give me a reason for what's happening? Then, if, as the first chapter shows, Satan and evil are the underlying causes, why does God allow evil to exist? Why doesn't He stop it for once and for all? Why does He allow evil to instigate the kind of atrocities the world is experiencing? You can see how these questions range from the deeply personal to one of the most perplexing theological dilemmas faced by Christians. While we cannot answer all these questions, at least from Job we do know that Satan is real, and humankind's co-operation with him accounts for much of the evil we see around us. Also, it is a simple fact of life that God, in His wisdom, does not exempt Christians from its effects. There has never been truer saying than Job 5:7 and 14:1

### **Job 5:7**

**Yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.**

### **Job 14:1**

**Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble.**

That is when the question of why does God permit this comes into play. If the trouble that comes our way is not the consequence of our own wrong doing, then the book of Job points us to trouble being a test of our faith. The test of faith comes in the life of

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

every Christian and Job helps us to deal with this, especially when the trouble associated with the testing of faith threatens to overwhelm us.

Firstly, how not to deal with it. While it is good to have the comfort of family and friends in bad times, Job's friends reminds us that in the things of God human reasoning has its limits. The arguments of Job's friends were based on false premises, which God denounces in chapter 42 to Eliphaz

### **Job 42:7-10**

**...I am angry with you and your two friends because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has....My servant Job will pray for you and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly.**

Briefly, Job's friends believed that God - without exception - punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. Their views are what scholars call 'retribution theology.' Like Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, Elihu also subscribes to the view that there must have been sin in the lives of Job and his children for a just God only punishes the wicked and would never punish the innocent.

### **Job 4:7 Eliphaz (Elihu)**

**Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed?**

### **Job 8:2-6 Bildad**

**How long will you say such things? Your words are like blustering wind. Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty pervert what is right? When your children sinned against him he gave them over to the penalty of**

**their sin. But if you will look to God and plead with the Almighty, if you are pure and upright, even now he will rouse himself on your behalf.**

**Job 11:5-6 & 14-16 Zophar**

**Oh, how I wish that God would speak, that he would open his lips against you and disclose to you the secrets of wisdom, for true wisdom has two sides. Know this: God has even forgotten some of your sin.....If you put away the sin that is in your hand and allow no evil to dwell in your tent, then you will lift up your face without shame; you will stand firm and without fear. You will surely forget your trouble, recalling it only as waters gone by.**

**Job 34:11 Elihu**

**He repays man for what he has done; he brings upon him what his conduct deserves.**

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In spite of these arguments, Job maintains the innocence of himself and his children and is right to do so, for behind these words is the Jewish belief that the possession of health, wealth and happiness are signs of God's favour and that a person is in right standing with Him. Conversely, lack of them is a sign of God's displeasure for not having enough faith, not working hard enough for Him and /or punishment for something that has offended Him. That is the message of the so-called 'prosperity gospel' today. That troubles are the result of sin in a person's life is also a belief in some fundamentalist churches. We can thank God that the wisdom of the book of Job shows us that this kind of reasoning is totally false. Job, for example,

demolishes this view, stating something we still see to the present day in 21:7

### **Job 21:7-9, 13**

**7 Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power? They see their children established around them, their offspring before their eyes. Their homes are safe and free from fear; the rod of God is not on them.....They spend their years in prosperity and go down to the grave in peace.**

That, too, is something that Job finds hard to take, especially as his friends keep insisting there is wickedness in him for some sin he has committed. They deal with Job's situation by apportioning blame according to dogma. They get angry with him for maintaining his integrity; and he gets frustrated because they refuse to see his point of view. Throughout this exchange we see Job expressing emotions and feelings that are wholly natural in his situation.

And this is comforting for us to know. Job dealt with his disaster by not ignoring what it was doing to him physically, mentally and emotionally. Many people approach this book from hearing the proverbial expression about the patience of Job. That is a complete misconception. Job was no paragon of virtue when it came to patience for he reacted in a very human way. The book of Job is a book of real, felt pain. Read chapter 3 and you see a man in complete despair, crushed under the weight of everything that has happened to him.

### **Job 3**

**May the day of my birth perish, and the night it was said 'A boy is born'.....May those who curse days curse that day.....Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb...Or why was I not hidden in the ground**

**like a stillborn child, like an infant who never saw the light of day.....Why is light given to those in misery and life to the bitter of soul, to those who long for death that does not come....For sighing comes to me instead of food, my groans pour out like water. What I feared has come upon me, and what I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil.**

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Job was not a stoic. He was feeling the full force of the disasters he had suffered. In chapter 6 he talks of his misery and anguish outweighing the sand of the sea. He has no strength to hope and no prospects to be patient for. Futility and misery linger into chapter 7 and beyond. Sleepless nights and futile days give him anguish of spirit and bitterness of soul which he feels he is entitled to complain about.

### **Job 6:2-3**

**“If only my anguish could be weighed and all my misery be placed on the scales! 3 It would surely outweigh the sand of the seas—**

### **Job 6:11**

**“What strength do I have, that I should still hope? What prospects, that I should be patient?**

### **Job 7:3-4**

**so I have been allotted months of futility, and nights of misery have been assigned to me. When I lie down I think, ‘How long before I get up?’ The night drags on, and I toss and turn until dawn.**

### **Job 7:11**

**“Therefore I will not keep silent; I will speak out in the anguish of my spirit, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.**

### **Job 10:1**

**I loathe my very life, therefore I will give free rein to my complaint.**

### **Job 10:18**

**Why then did you bring me out of the womb? I wish I had died before any eye saw me. If only I had never come into being, or had been carried straight from the womb to the grave.**

### **Job 17:1**

**My spirit is broken**

Far from illustrating the patience of Job, these verses point to the natural reaction of any normal human being faced with overwhelming troubles and being utterly helpless in the face of them. I take comfort from the fact that God understands our feelings of hopelessness, despair and perplexity. This book gives us the the knowledge that we are not alone if these thoughts and feelings come to us in bad times. Job’s suffering goes to the very core of his being. He demonstrates the emotions and feelings that are as prevalent today as they were in ancient times. There are those who say today that Christians should never get into this state. But if God desires truth in the inner

being then it is useless to pretend that we are not suffering the pain of our circumstances. God understands and He will not condemn us or judge us for being honest with ourselves and with Him.

And we could say that Job is brutally honest with God. He felt he had a right to know why disaster had struck and exactly what God had against him, for he knew that the God he believed in would not act in such a cruel and merciless way. We could say that wanting answers from God made Job all the more demanding because he knew his friends were wrong in their assessment of God, and he also knew that what had happened to him was, we would say, ‘out of character’ of the God he believed in. Job’s challenges to God are the expression of the struggle to understand God’s dealings with him, struggles which all Christians will face at one time or another. Job expresses what it feels like.

#### **Job 6:4**

**The arrows of the Almighty are in me, my spirit drinks in their poison. God’s terrors are marshalled against me.**

#### **Job 7:20**

**If I have sinned, what have I done to you, O Watcher of men? Why have you made me your target? Have I become a burden to you?**

#### **Job 10:2-3**

**I say to God: Do not declare me guilty, but tell me what charges you have against me.**

**Does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the plans of the wicked?**

### **Job 13:3**

**But I desire to speak to the Almighty and to argue my case with God.**

### **Job 16:9**

**God assails me and tears me in his anger and gnashes his teeth at me; my opponent fastens on me his piercing eyes.**

Job wants, as it were, his day in court and chapter 31 gives his side of the case, by citing evidence of his integrity. In terms of the practical wisdom of Proverbs it is impressive and leaves Job blameless. He has not been subject to lust, lying, deceit. He treats his servants and the poor with justice. He provides for the material needs of the poor, particularly mentioning widows and the fatherless. He has not put his trust in wealth or worshipped idols. He has not gloated over an enemy's misfortune and has been hospitable to everyone of his household and to strangers. Finally, he says he has never concealed wrong doing - in other words - there are no skeletons in his

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cupboard. This is the case he wants to present to God. We may see this as salvation by works, but we need to remember that God demanded obedience to the Law in Job's time.

And Job totally subscribes to the view that wisdom dictates that God must be honoured and His laws must be obeyed. Job walked faultlessly according to the light he had been given.

### **Job 28:20, 23, 28**

**Where does wisdom come from? Where does**

**understanding dwell?...God understands the way to it and he alone knows where it dwells, for he views the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens..... And he said to man, “ The fear of the Lord - that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.**

And from that perspective, Job knows that if his case were to be heard, justice would prevail and he would be vindicated. Unfortunately, as Job found, in dark times, sometimes God’s face is hidden from us. He is not to be found north, south, east or west.

**(Job 23:1-12 NIV)**

**1 Then Job replied:**

**“Even today my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning.If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say to me. Would he vigorously oppose me? No, he would not press charges against me. There the upright can establish their innocence before him, and there I would be delivered forever from my judge. “But if I go to the EAST, he is not there if I go to the WEST, I do not find him. When he is at work in the NORTH, I do not see him; when he turns to the SOUTH, I catch no glimpse of him. BUT HE KNOWS THE WAY THAT I TAKE; WHEN HE HAS TESTED ME, I WILL COME FORTH AS GOLD. MY FEET HAVE CLOSELY FOLLOWED HIS STEPS; I HAVE KEPT TO HIS WAY WITHOUT TURNING ASIDE. I HAVE NOT DEPARTED FROM THE COMMANDS OF HIS LIPS; I HAVE TREASURED THE**

## **WORDS OF HIS MOUTH MORE THAN MY DAILY BREAD.**

More importantly, from these verses we see that Job is coming out the other end by the realisation that his plight is a trial of faith. Throughout this book, while Job bemoans his own condition, he maintains a lofty view of God's character and nature. He is extremely distraught at what he knows God has permitted to happen to him, and complains about that, but never once, does he deny or denigrate God's essential goodness. When all else failed, the bottom line for Job was the belief - God is good and He cares about His people

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### **Job 9:4 comments**

**His wisdom is profound, his power is vast. Who has resisted him and come out unscathed?**

It was holding on to that fact that brought Job out the other side of this dark time and back into experiencing the blessing of God. How did he come out the other side? When God finally did speak chapter 38 - 41 it was not to answer Job's questions. It was to question Job about the breadth and depth of his knowledge and understanding of God's creation. It is a challenge to Job to show that he knows more than God and can do more than God. God's knowledge, wisdom, power, authority and control over the whole of creation are set out in a series of questions to Job. And his only answer is

### **Job 42:2**

**I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be**

**thwarted.....Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.**

In recognising the limits of his own wisdom in these verses, Job is also acknowledging that the wisdom of God is beyond all human knowledge and understanding. Those are limits that still stand today. That is because, like Job, our relationship with God is based on faith, not sight, and as David said on Sunday, God's purposes are being worked out from the expanse of eternity, not a human lifespan. The wisdom of the book of Job shows us that we can reflect on all these hard questions about meaning in our lives and about God and His ways of dealing with His creation, human and natural. We are also permitted to ask the questions that perplex us and give us a sense of injustice at undeserved, innocent suffering. But, without the bedrock of faith, we will end up like Solomon rather than Job.

Job's faith was tested to the very limits of endurance and it might seem from his reaction that his faith was wavering or could be destroyed under such pressure. Some would say today that if a Christian gets into that state then they have lost their faith. However, Job shows us what one commentator describes as disturbed faith. Think of faith as a deep smooth pond. Then picture it when a brick has been thrown in. The ripples may be widespread and violent, but the pond remains a real pond. The faith is still there even though there is a lot of visible disturbance on the surface. The wisdom of Job teaches us that faith ultimately is having a right view of God regardless of that disturbance and regardless of the fact that He does not give us the kinds of answers we want. And that is something we have to accept if faith is to survive.

God knows when we go through the mill. It is also very significant that when God does speak, He answered Job out of the storm (38:1). Job had endured a terrible

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storm, but come out of it with his faith intact. It has been said that “Sometimes God calms the storm. Sometimes He lets the storm rage and calms His child.” This is what happened with Job. It has also been said “Don’t tell God how big your storm is: tell the storm how big your God is.” Faith will eventually do this, but like Job, there will be a process of ‘going through the waters’ and thinking things through before we can get to this point. Job did get there, and because of his right view of God, he came to the realisation that even death itself could not destroy his faith in a good, true and righteous and just God

### **Job13:13**

**Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him:...**

And God granted him a desire of his heart. Because his words were written on a scroll, they have become a blessing to all whose faith gets disturbed by circumstances For millennia this book has provided not just one of the greatest professions of faith ever recorded, but also the earliest prophecy of the end times when we will all see our Redeemer with our own eyes.

### **Job 19:23-27**

**O that my words were recorded, that they we're written on a scroll, that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved in rock forever! I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see**

**God; I myself will see him with my own eyes - I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me.**

Like no other book in Scripture, the wisdom of Job teaches us that we must believe in the God of the Bible. A right view of God, in spite of everything that happens to us, enables us to endorse Job's great assertions of faith and indications of what constitutes Christian faith today. These words of faith take us forward to the day when wisdom was personified in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. The practical and reflective wisdom of the Old Testament come together in the Person and work of Jesus as we will see in the final talk next week.

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## **WISDOM OF THE AGES**

### **WEEK 6: Wisdom Personified**

We can see from the overview of wisdom in the Old Testament that wisdom cannot be defined and packaged into a neat little bundle because it is relevant to all that we do, say, think and feel. What is certain, however, is that wisdom starts with the belief in God being the source of all wisdom and it is He who sets the standards of what constitutes a wise course of life. In the Old Testament, as we saw in Job, reflective wisdom consists of having a right perspective of God's existence, character and nature in spite of circumstances. Practical wisdom consists of obeying His commands, which in the Old Testament were contained in the Torah, with wisdom literature spelling out what those meant in practical terms. When we come to the New Testament those two fundamental premises do not change. The key difference is that wisdom does not simply consist of a set of principles: it becomes centred on a Person. If this is the case, should we then be looking back to

the Old Testament for our knowledge and understanding of wisdom? The answer is a resounding 'Yes'. What we find in the Old Testament is the identification of the conduct and behaviour required to live a life pleasing to God. What it also does is give voice to the questions that we are still asking today, although God's revelation in Jesus gives us more insight than what Job had. Nevertheless, like Job, we still won't have all the answers and there will be times when it seems God does hide His face from us, leading to us not understanding what is going on.

As well as this, two scholars who have written a commentary on the New Testament's use of the Old Testament have commented on 369 references just from Job, Proverbs, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. They are not direct quotes, but each text picks up on the thoughts, comments and beliefs of the writers of the Old Testament books.

The blind man's response to the Pharisees who were treating Jesus with utter contempt in their questioning of his cure says that God only listens to the prayers of Godly people.

**John 9:31**

**We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will.**

**Proverbs 15:8**

**The Lord detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him.**

**Proverbs 28:9**

**If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are detestable.**

Paul in Romans 11:33 echoes Job 11:7

## **Romans 11:33**

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**Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out.**

### **Job 11:7**

**Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty?**

Jesus links Solomon with lilies a reference to Song of Songs 2:1

### **Luke 12:27**

**Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these.**

### **Song of Songs 2:1**

**I am a rose of Sharon, lily of the valleys.**

And white clothes throughout the Bible are the garments of the righteous.

### **Revelation 3:4**

**Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.**

### **Ecclesiastes 9:8**

**Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil.**

Just these isolated examples give us a glimpse of the widespread influence of the wisdom books in the New Testament and as we look at how wisdom is personified in Jesus, the connections become even stronger. In the first place, the wisdom, which is integral to the character and nature of God, becomes visible in the Person of Christ from babyhood to manhood.

### **Luke 2:40**

**And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.**

### **Luke 2:47**

**Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. Luke 2:52**

**And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and men.**

### **Matthew 13:54**

**Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. “Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?” they asked**

**(Matthew 13:54 NIV)**

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### **Mark 6:2**

**When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the**

**synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.  
“Where did this man get these things?” they asked.  
“What’s this wisdom that has been given him? What are  
these remarkable miracles he is performing.**

While the miracles would naturally have attracted public attention, in the gospels they are secondary to Jesus’ preaching and teaching ministry. As we saw in Proverbs, the purpose of wisdom was to teach people reflective and practical principles that would enable them to live a good, honest and upright lives. Jesus’ preaching about the kingdom of God and teaching, particularly through parables, spoke directly to ordinary people in terms that they could understand. And, to this day, the Sermon on the Mount is still regarded as one of the greatest ethical speeches ever made. We could say however that Jesus took Old Testament wisdom to a higher level. Old Testament wisdom guided people to a lifestyle that they hoped would lead to acceptance by God when final judgement came if the good deeds outweighed the bad. For Old Testament people there was never an assurance of where they stood with God. Only the Pharisees believed they would certainly achieve acceptance by their legalistic adherence to the law. But, the wisdom preached and taught by Jesus promised people the certainty of eternal life if His principles were accepted - evidenced by belief in Who and What He was - and obedience to His commands. That is what constitutes the ‘fear of the Lord’ in the New Testament for as Jesus said in John anyone who accepted Him was also accepted by the One who sent Him. That was the beginning of gospel wisdom.

An illustration of the certainty Jesus bestows can be seen through Jesus’ comparing Himself to Solomon.

**(Luke 11:31 NIV)**

**The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom; and now something greater than Solomon is here**

We saw how Solomon was endowed with more wisdom than anyone else on earth, before or since. Only Jesus was the exception to that statement. We saw how wisdom was wasted on Solomon, for ignoring his own advice sowed all the seeds of the future turbulent and tragic history of his people.

Apostasy and idolatry permeated every level of society. In effect, he destroyed his kingdom. When Jesus claimed to be greater than Solomon, there is the implicit indication that by practising what He preached, He could build a kingdom that would last forever. Like David, He would

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weld together the disparate peoples and tribes of the earth into the Kingdom of God, of which the writer to the Hebrews says:

**But about the Son he says,**

**“Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom**

**(Hebrews 1:8 NIV)**

**Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, 29 for our “God is a consuming fire.”**

**(Hebrews 12:28-29 NIV)**

**After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. 10 And they cried out in a loud voice:**

**“Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb (Revelation 7:9-10 NIV)**

What made the difference. Solomon allowed his fear of the Lord to slowly but surely diminish until it was non-existent over the period of his reign. As we saw in Jesus' discourses in the upper room, to the very end of His ministry His chief aim was to glorify the Father. Indeed, with His dying breath, He commended His spirit into the hands of the Father. Jesus' commitment to God's plan of salvation was total and faultlessly executed, ensuring that God's kingdom would become a reality for all who believed in Him.

Just as Proverbs presented choices of what path people would follow in their lives, the coming of Christ presents us with a choice upon which our lives will be based. Among the ways Jesus presented these choices were the parables of the wise and foolish builders, the wise and foolish virgins and the narrow and broad roads. Apart from the first two parables, Jesus makes very few references to wisdom or being wise. Yet the wisdom in all His words and actions point to the fact that people do have to make a choice and it's a choice that has been controversial throughout the last 2000 years. Christians are often criticised by non-believers for their inflexibility in insisting that belief in Jesus Christ is the only way to God. We say that not to be judgmental, but to remain true to God's word which clearly teaches that as fact. In that sense, for us today,

the world is divided into two groups of people - believers and non-believers. But that division has been in existence from the first century and it is Paul who brings out all the implications of whether or not our choices are guided by the wisdom that comes through the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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When we turn to Paul in the first century, he too saw clear divisions in his society, which he defines by wisdom. In Paul's day only two social groups were of any consequence - Jews and Gentiles. As a Jew, he knew his people were chosen of God and, therefore, knew about the one true God and the manner in which He should be worshipped and served.

Opposed to the Jews were the Gentiles, far from God with a reputation for every kind of immorality. But Paul saw more clearly than his fellow apostles, that as far as the gospel was concerned, the real dividing line was not ethnic or moral, but according to the response to the gospel he preached.

Acceptance was wise leading to greater wisdom in Christ; rejection was foolish, leading eventually to spiritual death. In the major Greek city of Corinth, Paul showed the courage of his convictions, disparaging the vaunted wisdom of the Greeks, in favour of the simple gospel of Christ.

### **1 Corinthians 1:20-25 & 30-31**

**Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached**

**to save those who believe. *Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength....It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.***  
**31 Therefore, as it is written:“Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”**

The Jews, as we saw in John, wanted signs and wonders. They got them but still refused to believe. The Greeks looked for wisdom, but as we saw in the very first talk, were looking for it in the wrong place. Oswald Chambers has summed up both attitudes saying, “The world of wisdom is arrant stupidity to the wisdom of the world. “But to both Corinthians and the Ephesians, and the world at large, Paul insists wisdom is to be found in Christ alone.

### **Ephesians 1:7-10**

**In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the richness of Gods grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment —to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.**

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In plain language Paul tells his readers and hearers that the wisdom of God was personified in the earthly ministry of Jesus. His letters leave us in no doubt, that for Christians today, Jesus is the fount of all wisdom. Paul's life's work after his conversion was to proclaim Christ for the express purpose of bringing people to that source of wisdom.

**(Colossians 2:2-3 NIV)**

**....in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.**

To Paul, the wisdom of God was sending His Son into the world to atone for sin. That is why wisdom cannot be separated from the Person and work of Christ, who is One with the Father. As he stated in Ephesians **“Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God - that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.”**

The very gospel which has been preached by the Church for the last 2000 is the result of the wisdom and understanding by which God has revealed His will for humanity though all that Christ was and all that He did and said. The New Testament brings God near to us in a way that was not possible for the saints of the Old Testament. That is because we not only have the revelation of salvation's plan which guarantees that belief in the atoning work of Christ on the cross we know in our already-but-not- yet situation, before God we have the assurance of righteousness, holiness and redemption. And what

gives us that assurance is the work of the Holy Spirit. we have the Spirit of wisdom to help us know and understand it and thereby grow in the wisdom that keeps the 'fear of the Lord' in the forefront of who and what we are and what we do with our lives. Jesus told His disciples that they would be given wisdom to refute the arguments of their opponents and Stephen's martyrdom did this so successfully that it took the cardinal sins of lying and malice to bring about his death.

**(Luke 21:15 NIV)**

**For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict**

**(Acts 6:10-11 NIV)**

**10 But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.**

**11 Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."**

Through these words we can see that when faith is centred on a Person, the whole dynamic changes and wisdom becomes an integral part of a personal relationship

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rather than a dogma to be followed. And we can be sure of wisdom coming through because of the work of the Holy Spirit - the same Spirit of wisdom given to the various people we mentioned in the Old Testament. This was something Paul understood very well.

**(1 Corinthians 2:13-16 NIV)**

**What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit- taught words.**

**(Colossians 1:9-10)**

**For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God....**

And, verse 10 brings the two forms of wisdom together - good works and growing in the knowledge of God. Some scholars have pointed out that there is a conflict between Paul and James because James talks about works, while Paul emphasises faith. But where wisdom is concerned the two are not opposites but complement each other. We saw that all reflective wisdom started with the 'fear of the Lord'. What the New Testament does is make that statement more real by making it dependent on faith in Jesus Christ. We also saw from Proverbs that practical wisdom was the outcome of 'the fear of the Lord'. What the New Testament does is show that our practical day-to-day activities should be the manifestation of our faith.

**(James 3:13-18 NIV)**

**13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them**

**show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. 14 But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. 15 Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. 17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. 18 Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.**

Tease out the meaning of what James includes in his list of the good life powered by wisdom and you will find them in agreement with what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount and what Paul lists as the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. Faith and the

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works that proceed from it are two sides of the one coin. Reflective and practical wisdom merge together when centred on the Person of Jesus. No creed, ideology, philosophy or cause has ever claimed to bring the theory and the practice associated with it into perfect alignment, in the way that the Christian faith does.

Having said all of that, we still have to take warning from Solomon in the Old Testament and Peter in the New Testament about what we do with wisdom.

## **2 Peter 3:15-16**

**Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother *Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him*. 16 He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction**

The activity of the Holy Spirit is in clear view as is Peter's description of Paul's wisdom in the letters that he wrote and, at the same time, shows that Scriptural, spiritual wisdom can be distorted. We may be given the wisdom to speak and act appropriately in certain situations, but that does not mean that what to us is irrefutable sound wisdom will not be denied or distorted by others. Peter shows that even within a short time of Paul's letters becoming public, people were already using what he said to suit their own agendas. In Christian terms, reading between the lines, there is a warning too that seeking wisdom for wisdom's sake can be as destructive as not having wisdom that comes from the knowledge and understanding of God's word at all. There is a danger that, like Solomon, what we do with the wisdom we acquire even of Godly matters, can be wasted if it starts to be used in ways that do not glorify God and uphold the integrity of the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Two texts give us a wise way to avoid falling into those kinds of snares. The first tells us that God-given wisdom is there for the asking. The minute we speak or act, like Job's friends, according to our own wisdom, we risk God's censure. Asking for wisdom, in a sense is like asking for daily guidance and God's will in matters that concern us and our dealings with

others.. The second is Paul's prayer for the Ephesians and tells us the purpose to which our wisdom should be directed. As we do that, growth in wisdom becomes so automatic that we are not even conscious we possess it.

**(James 1:5-8 NIV)**

**If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all**

**without finding fault, and it will be given to you.**

**(Ephesians 1:17 NIV)**

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**I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better**

Two thousand years later God's wisdom is there for the asking and will be given freely and generously. And it will never be wasted if it is directed towards the one purpose of - "So that you may know Him better".

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