

1 CHAPTER

The Choice of Life

While in Qohelet (Ecclesiastes), Solomon's other book, the author is presented as king of Jerusalem (Eccles. 1:1), in Proverbs he is introduced as "king of Israel" (1:1). The reason for this slight variation is that when he composes this book, Solomon is still in control of the great kingdom. Solomon has not yet reached the stage when he does not "fully follow the Lord, as did his father David" (1 Kings 11:6). Solomon is still in full possession of his wisdom. And still in touch with his spiritual roots, Solomon decides to transmit his heritage and instruct his son, the future king, just as did the ancient Egyptian kings with their sons. The first lesson follows the progression of a classic curriculum. After having outlined the program and defined the purpose of his course, Solomon lays down the foundation: the fear of the Lord.

Program and purpose

Solomon the Teacher proposes five objectives: "to know wisdom" (1:2a); "to perceive the words of understanding" (1:2b); "to receive the instruction of wisdom" (1:3); "to give prudence to the simple" (1:4); and "to understand a proverb" (1:6).

The first proposition, "to know wisdom," warns us that wisdom is not something that we can achieve by ourselves. The Hebrew verb *yad'*,

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“to know,” refers to the conjugal experience (Gen. 4:1; 38:26); it is often used to characterize the relationship with God (Hos. 13:5; John 17:3).

According to Solomon, “to know wisdom” means first of all to live in a personal relationship with God. “To know wisdom” means “to know God.” It is interesting to note that the language of our passage echoes the language of the story of Solomon when he asked God for wisdom (1 Kings 3:7–14). The first verb, *bin*, “to perceive,” is precisely the object of his request to God: “Give to Your servant an understanding heart to . . . discern [*bin*] between good and evil” (1 Kings 3:9). The Hebrew verb *bin* is etymologically related to the preposition *beyn*, which means “between,” implying the operation of distinguishing between two options or two ways. Wisdom is thus defined as the capacity “to discern,” “to distinguish” between good and evil.

Yet this wisdom can be obtained only as a gift from God. The verb “give” (*ntn*) is used three times: the first time by Solomon, who asks God to “give” him the wisdom (1 Kings 3:9); and the other two times by God, who is the subject of the verb (1 Kings 3:12, 13; cf. 1 Kings 4:29; 5:12). The verb “give” appears also in our passage of Proverbs (1:4), where it is associated with the verb “receive” (1:3). In his introduction, Solomon insists that wisdom is “received” from God and is not the result of our work; it is not something we produce.

The book of Proverbs begins with this affirmation of the grace of God. Only through this gift from God shall we be wise. Interestingly, the verb “understand” (*bin*) reappears in the conclusion of our passage; this time the verb applies to the “understanding” of the proverbs (1:6). This is the point of this introduction: before we read the book of Proverbs and try to decipher its message, we need to realize that without God’s gift of wisdom, we will not be able to “understand” this book. The proverb will remain “an enigma,” and the words of the wise man will be as “riddles” (1:6).

Of course, this wisdom is not some kind of magic formula; it is not just information that we shall “know” in our common-sense

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understanding of the term. To know wisdom is to know God; that is, it is to have a personal relationship with Him. Solomon insists that unless we “receive” Him, we will not understand Him. Unlike the classic pastoral sermon, which ends with an appeal to repent and draw near to God after a lengthy emotional and/or intellectual development, the book of Proverbs begins with an appeal to receive God in our lives.

The foundation

Solomon had started his teaching with reference to knowledge (1:2). He next explains that the beginning of knowledge is “the fear of the Lord” (1:7). This is the foundation upon which the rest of his lessons will stand. This idea is expressed not only through the syntax of the phrase, which has “the fear of the Lord” at the beginning of the sentence (a sign of emphasis), but is explicitly qualified as “the beginning.”

The Hebrew term for “beginning,” *re’shit*, refers to the absolute beginning that characterizes creation (Gen. 1:1). This is the meaning that has been retained in Proverbs (see 8:23). The “fear of the Lord” is not just the beginning of a particular religious or intellectual experience; it is the cosmic beginning that encompasses “all” (John 1:3); “all,” including the most trivial and ordinary things of daily life; “all,” including the most obscure moments when no one sees us. There is no room here for a neutral place, a no man’s land between God and humans.

This view is already contained in the very notion of “the fear of the Lord.” The fear of God is not some superstitious apprehension often associated with a religious person who obeys God out of fear for his life or for his happiness. To fear God means to have and entertain the acute sense of His presence. God is present not only in the church or when we pray but in the office, in the kitchen, in the bedroom, in the marketplace. God is present when we are with people or when we are alone, in the light or in the darkness (see Ps. 139:2–8). This notion is not to be perceived as a threat. God is not the policeman who watches us in order to catch us and punish us. Instead, as the psalmist understands,

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this presence of God is a comforting assurance: “You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me” (Ps. 139:5). God’s presence means God’s protection.

On the other hand, that same notion allows God to be the Judge. Because God can see everything, He can be the just Judge (see Ps. 139:1, 23–24). In Ecclesiastes, Solomon concludes with a call to “fear God. . . . For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether it is good or whether it is evil” (Eccles. 12:13–14). To be aware of God’s presence always and everywhere obliges us to a certain way of life inspired and oriented according to God’s will, a holy life. This is the lesson that Solomon embraces in his book of Proverbs. The statement, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,” means that all venues of life should be rooted in the fear of the Lord. The topic of the book of Proverbs concerns, then, our destiny.

This is why the next point is about education. To ensure the success of this ambitious program, Solomon does not point to the pastor or to the rabbi or the priest or to the professor or to the specialized educator, or to the government. Education is primarily a family affair. Both the father and the mother are involved (1:8–9). This principle frames the book of Proverbs, which begins with the instruction of the father to his son (1:8) and ends with the instruction of the mother to her son (31:1). Solomon entrusts the foundation to the parents’ hands. The ornaments and the chain symbolize the beauty and grace of wisdom (3:1, 22). For it is in the family that the son will be prepared to make the right choice, resist the bad influence, and engage in the ways of wisdom.

The call of sinners

The sinners come always in plural (1:10). They like to be in a crowd; the number gives legitimacy and power to their empty cause. They are also described as working “secretly” (1:11, 18) and in haste (1:16), for their intentions are harmful. Their invitation sounds very tempting, suggesting that we will be rich and great (1:13).

Solomon’s first advice is simple: “Do not consent” (1:10). The

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Hebrew phrase is more concrete; it means literally “do not come!” The same counsel will be repeated later: “Do not walk in the way with them, keep your foot from their path” (1:15). Do not even play with the idea that as long as you refrain from the actual evil, it is OK. Solomon traces the beginning of the mistake as being in the company of sinners. Interestingly, only when we have made that first passive act, not to move, are we able to grasp Solomon’s explanation as to why we should not respond to the sinners. The thinking process intervenes only after the gut response of faith and obedience without thinking. Solomon’s reason is concerned, then, with the consequence of sin. In fact, evil is not beneficial, for the sinner will be the victim of his own sin. He will fall in his own trap (1:18). The gain that he intended to acquire through his evil work will turn out to be fatal to him (1:19).

The call of wisdom

The call of Wisdom contrasts to the call of sinners. While the sinners speak in plural, Wisdom speaks in singular. It is also interesting that the one who responds positively to Wisdom is singular (1:33), while the fools and the simple ones who reject her invitation are plural (1:22, 24, 28–32). While the sinners hide and work in secret, Wisdom has nothing to hide and shouts in the open (1:21). Wisdom is also obliged to cry because of the “noisy streets” (1:21, NASB). The loud call of Wisdom dismisses any possible excuse of ignorance on the part of the fool. They are well informed about her message: “I will make my words known to you” (1:23). And yet they mock her and despise her call and her invitation (1:22, 24–25). While the lesson about sinners takes only a few verses (1:1–19), Solomon’s attention to Wisdom covers most of the book. For the best method to fight against evil is not so much the apologetic demonstration against it, but rather to show the value of Wisdom.

The case takes the form of a beautiful poem in the form of a chiasmic structure. The climax of Wisdom’s defense is Wisdom’s laughter, which is located in the center of the chiasmic passage (1:26–28). The mocking

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irony of Wisdom responds to the mockery of the fools. Wisdom had promised them that she would fill them with her spirit (1:23). Instead, the fools are filled with their own fables. This ridiculous condition of the fools, who refused to listen to Wisdom, is Wisdom's best argument against the foolishness of their choice. This paradox can be observed today in our secular societies, where the majority of citizens mock the minority of believers in God and treat them as naïve. Ironically these "intelligent" and "rational" people, who cannot accept the idea of God, end up believing in all kinds of fables they have invented themselves. They mock those who fear God, but they fear the black cat or carefully avoid passing under the ladder or tremble at the number thirteen. In the same vein are those who offer no doubt about the very imaginative system of evolution, which teaches us that humans are the natural descendants of the chimpanzee or of the little fish, but raise all their doubts against the truth of creation, which brings the most compelling evidence, namely that humans have been created by a powerful Creator.

The response to wisdom

To the previous double warning consisting of two ifs ("if sinners entice you" [1:10], "if they say" [1:11]), which entailed the categorical negation "do not" (1:10, 15), the author of Proverbs proposes three ifs: "if you receive my words" (2:1); "if you cry out for discernment" (2:3); "if you seek her as silver" (2:4). This time the "if" leads to a positive promise: "Then you will understand the fear of the LORD" (2:5). The acquisition of "the fear of the LORD," which is "the beginning of wisdom," is not the result of effort on our part. The only condition for it is our passion, our sincere desire to "receive," "to cry out for it," "to seek." It is not the result of our work; it is, on the contrary, the response of our consciousness of our need, precisely because we are unable to produce it and find it by ourselves. It does not come from us. It is a gift of God: "the LORD gives wisdom" (2:6).

To be wise means simply to put ourselves in God's hands. He will

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do the job. He will guide our lives: He will shield (2:7), He will guard (2:8a), He will preserve (2:8b). From that experience we will then “understand” (2:9). If we have the wisdom to entrust Him with our life, we will then understand that indeed this choice was Wisdom. We will understand that it was right only if we do the right. The proof of Wisdom will be found in our lives (Matt. 12:33).

From the call to “receive” Wisdom (2:1) the teacher moves to the next step: “when wisdom enters your heart” (2:10). The experience with Wisdom is not just the knowledge of the truth; it is not enough simply to know about the right way. This knowledge must go inside us. The Law of God should be in our heart in such a way that doing God’s will becomes pleasant and enjoyable (2:10). It is no longer the product of our painful duty. Only this intimate experience will protect from evil. The outcome of our fight against evil is decided in our heart. As long as we content ourselves with legalistic doing or not doing, overlooking the hidden and secret ripples of our intimate thoughts, we are vulnerable prey to the enemy.

Solomon warns his son against two persons who represent “the way of evil” (2:12): the perverse man (2:12–15) and the seductress (2:16–19). Both look friendly and lovely, but both lead to the same ways of “darkness” (2:13) and “death” (2:18). Both are deceptive. The former takes us away from the paths of righteousness and disguises evil under the face of happiness (2:13, 14). The latter disguises evil under the face of beauty and love, and makes us forget the covenant of our youth (2:17).

The conclusion (2:21–22) recasts the classic doctrine of the two ways. In regard to good and evil, there is no middle way. It is life for the righteous (2:21) and death for the wicked (2:22). This paradigm echoes Moses’ appeal to his people in the book of Deuteronomy: “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. . . . I have set before you life and death . . . ; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live” (Deut. 30:15–19).

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The prospect of life

The lesson of the choice of life, which was only implied in the preceding verses, is now explicitly inferred in the following chapter, where the motif of “Life” is dominant. It recurs as a refrain (3:2, 7, 16, 18, 22, 23, 35) around five topics, which are arranged according to a chiasmic structure (A-B-C-B₁-A₁): the Law, the Lord, Wisdom, the Lord, the Law.

The Law (3:1–4). The first promise of life is introduced by the negative injunction, “do not forget” (3:1), which responds to the other negative injunction, “do not consent” (1:10). While in the former injunction refusal was expected, in the present injunction acceptance is expected. The duty to remember is generative of life, just as the root of the plant is necessary for its life. For Proverbs, the memory of the Law (3:1) will guarantee long life and *shalom* (3:2), which means “completeness,” implying “peace” and “health.” The invitation to bind the Law around the neck (3:3) recalls Moses’ recommendation about the Law (Deut. 6:8). The Law is described (3:3) with the rigorous dimension of truth (*’emet*) and the lovely dimension of grace (*khesed*).

Grace is not against the Law; it is a part of it, just as justice is. This twofold dimension of the Law reappears in its double effect: “find favor and high esteem” (3:4). The Hebrew word *khen* (translated “favor”) means “grace” (1:9; 3:34). The Hebrew word *sekhel* (translated “esteem”) refers to the demands of intelligence and the intellectual process and is thus often translated “understanding” (13:15; 16:22; Ps. 111:10).

Again the Law refers to both the dimension of love and the dimension of rightness. The Law applies to both our relationship with God and our relationship with man (3:4b). The same lesson is given in the Decalogue, whose first part (Exod. 20:1–7) concerns our relationship with God and the third part (Exod. 20:12–17) concerns our relationship with our fellow human beings. The section on the Sabbath, which is in the middle (Exod. 20:8–11), concerns both relationships.

The Lord (3:5–12). The obedience to the Law should be rooted in our trust in the Lord (3:3), our faith in God; otherwise we fall into

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legalism. We do not obey the Law because we judge this Law as good but because the Giver of the Law is good. The value of the Law is not determined by our understanding (3:5) or our wisdom (3:7), an attitude deemed as foolish and hopeless (26:12), but because it is the Law of God.

When Solomon urges his son to “trust in the LORD,” it means to “acknowledge” Him “in all your ways” (3:6), which refers to all the aspects of life. And when he exhorts his son to “fear the LORD,” it means to “depart from evil” (3:7). To be sure, many people do good things and are ethical even though they do not believe in God, simply because they have received a good education and also because they have learned that it is reasonable to observe these laws for their own benefit.

For the believer there is a more profound reason than just reason itself. The believer’s motivation is rooted in his/her relationship with a living person, God Himself. This is why the believer has to “honor the Lord” also with their “possessions” (3:9), which means to give to Him their tithes and offerings, because they know that they owe everything to God. It is, then, just logical that they will be benefit from Him all the more; for to give to God from everything they have is to acknowledge that they have received everything from Him.

Our text goes even further in this reasoning. Even when we endure God’s punishment, we should learn to receive it as a gift of God. This is just another expression of His fatherly love and thoughtful concern for us (3:11–12).

Wisdom (3:13–18). In the center of the chapter the author has inserted a poetic hymn to Wisdom. After the rigorous argumentation, poetry should touch another chord to reach all the sensitivities and all the sides of our brain. The poem begins and ends with the same blessing, as an inclusio:

“Happy is the man who finds wisdom” (3:13)

“Happy are all who retain her” (3:18)

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The two statements respond to and complement each other: it is not enough to find wisdom; we also need to keep it.

Between the two blessings, the value of wisdom is suggested through two metaphors. First, Wisdom is compared to silver, gold, and rubies (3:14–15), to riches and honor (3:16), to affirm the superiority of Wisdom over all these precious things. Second, Wisdom is associated with *shalom* (3:17) and is identified with life (3:18). It is interesting that the former value is held in Wisdom's left hand (3:16b), while the latter value is held in her right hand (3:16a). What this means is that life is more important than wealth.

In fact, the Hebrew reference to Wisdom is related to the tree of life, with which Wisdom is identified (3:18). This last imagery takes us into the midst of the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9), which suggests the lost ideal environment when evil had not yet affected the world. At the same time, this evocation from the far past nurtures our hope that one day, in the future, we shall eat the fruit of the tree of life again (Rev. 22:2).

The Lord (3:19–26). The Hebrew wisdom does not exist apart from God; He used it as an instrument to create the world (3:19–20). Thus all the benefits of Wisdom do in fact originate in God, the Creator. The immediate lesson is that our life is in God's hands. Walking with God means, then, a life assurance (3:22) and the guarantee that we will be secure and safe (3:23). Even when we sleep, God is in control (3:24). We should not be afraid (3:24, 25) or worry: "your sleep will be sweet" (3:24b). God will protect us not only from the wicked (3:25a), the external enemy, but from ourselves as well (3:23, 26b).

The Law (3:27–35). Strangely, God does not require anything from us in exchange for His protection. The only duty that God expects from us concerns our neighbors. The same extraordinary religion is outlined in Micah the prophet: "He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8).

This is the program of Proverbs: we should not refrain from doing

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“good” to the one who is in need (3:27); we should not lie to our neighbor (3:28); we should act justly (3:30, 33) and love mercy (3:31); we should be humble (3:34). All these human duties are given in the form of divine commandments. Five times the injunction “do not” is repeated, echoing the “do not” introduced previously in reference to the law (3:1).

These acts on behalf of our neighbor are religious acts not only because they are God’s commandments but also because the doing or not doing generates God’s blessing or curse (3:33). Again the doctrine of the two ways is delineated. The chapter ends with the perspective of two destinies, “glory” to the wise, “shame” to the fool (3:35). These two words do not refer to a mere psychological condition. Their association has eschatological significance (Hos. 4:7). Along the same line of life and death associated with the righteous and the wicked looms the prospect of eternal life with the glory of God and eternal death in the shame of the dust (Dan. 12:2).