

Choose Wisdom

May 24, 2009

Purpose To invite us to seek wisdom as the way to live in harmony with God and with one another

Key Bible reference: Proverbs 2.1-15

Key Verse: Proverbs 2.6

Proverbs 2:1-4. A striking feature in the passage we are studying is the conditional or invitational way in which the teachings are presented. In other sections of Proverbs, various points are simply presented as facts or as commandments. Here they are presented as an invitation, beginning with the word if and leading to the promise that if one does what is suggested, "then..." Note that the first of these "ifs" appears in verse 1. The next one appears in verse 3, and the third appears in verse 4. The promise is introduced with the first "then" in verse 5 and is reiterated with a second "then" in verse 9.

What this pattern means is that the path of wisdom is an option. There are other paths that this particular passage does not spell out, but the very word if implies other possibilities. In any case, wisdom is not something that happens naturally. It requires certain things that this passage introduces with each of its "ifs."

Note also that the three "ifs" move in a crescendo. The first (2:1-2) has to do with accepting, treasuring the commandments, being attentive, inclining the heart. All these are positive moves, but they are not particularly active or committed. The second "if" (2:3) is more demanding. The reader is asked to "cry out for insight" and to "raise your voice for understanding." Now it is no longer simply a matter of accepting or listening but of demanding, pleading for something. Finally, the

third "if" (2:4) requires that this quest for wisdom become as all-embracing as if it were a search for silver or for a hidden treasure.

Verses 5-7a. All these verses flow from the first "then." Notice that the great promise to one who fulfills the "ifs" of the previous verses is not material wealth or success; it is "knowledge and understanding." This, however, is a particular sort of knowledge and understanding. It is understanding of the fear of the Lord and knowledge of God. Here we must recall that "wisdom" in the biblical sense is not the same as knowing many things or even understanding how things work or how they are made (as in our modern sciences). Wisdom is an understanding of God and of life as God wants it to be lived. This is what is promised to those who accept the "ifs" of the earlier verses.

This knowledge or wisdom is not something we can discover by ourselves. It comes from God (2:6). It is closely connected with the manner in which one conducts one's life. To those who are upright, God grants sound wisdom (2:7a).

Verses 7b-8. Here we come to a problem. A notion often repeated in Proverbs is that the righteous and the wise receive special protection from God. Clearly, this understanding presents some difficulties when compared with what we see in the Book of Job. We have here a different theological emphasis. Again, remember that the words of Job can sound similar to the words of Eliphaz in Job. It

all depends on the context in which they are said. There is good, common wisdom in saying that good brings its own reward, as long as we do not make this a doctrine with which to explain why evil befalls us or others.

Verses 9-15. We come to the second series of promises, introduced once again with the word "then." In many ways, these promises are similar to the ones that followed the first "then." Here again the essence of the promise is not material rewards but understanding (2:9), wisdom (2:10), and prudence (2:11-15). These should not be read as a list of different things, as if Proverbs were trying to classify and list the rewards of wise conduct. Rather, they are similar ways of saying what amounts to the same thing: If you eagerly seek wisdom, you will receive it from God.

Note that the understanding promised in verse 9 includes "righteousness and justice/and equity, every good path." It may seem odd that, if one walks rightly before God and seeks wisdom, one will be rewarded with the wisdom to understand what it means to walk rightly and seek wisdom. There is a circularity about this argument that may appear strange to our

Western minds. We need to know whether the chicken or the egg comes first. Here, we are told that if you have the chicken, you will get eggs and that if you have eggs, you will get chickens. One does not really know what good is until one does it. The wisdom that comes out of doing good tells us what good is. By walking along "every good path," we learn what those paths are. We will know the good paths because "wisdom will come into your heart, /and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul" (2:10). Something similar is said about prudence and understanding in verse 11.

Finally, verses 12-15 are interesting because they return to the matter of whether those who do good are rewarded. Here, it is not that we should expect that if we do good, God will shower us with goodies. It is rather that by following the path of wisdom, knowledge, and prudence, we will be preserved from the way of evil. Think in terms of roads. One cannot walk along two roads at the same time. Therefore, walking on the right road automatically protects one from the snares of the wrong road. This understanding does not turn God into an automatic rewarder of good and punisher of evil, as Job's three friends tried to do.