

WISDOM

There is much praise of wisdom in that part of the Scripture which we are now considering in our daily reading—The Proverbs of Solomon. It is impossible that this praise can be exaggerated. Solomon himself had put the matter to the utmost proof. He tells us in the Ecclesiastes that, having come to great estate, he communed with his own heart, and gave himself “*to know wisdom and to know madness and folly,*” that he “*might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life*” (2:3). Whatsoever his eyes desired, he kept not from them, he withheld not his heart from any joy. He gave himself to delights and to great works, and attained to a degree of prosperity and opportunity exceeding all who were before him in Jerusalem. When he had gone through it all, his verdict was—

“Wisdom excelleth folly as far as the light excelleth darkness” (2:13).

Now, who can hope to have a better opportunity of testing this matter than Solomon? Ashe says,

“What can the man do that cometh after the king?”

Now, let us realise for a moment what this wisdom is. Our power to respond to Solomon’s verdict, and to apply it practically in our lives, will be greatly strengthened by a clear conception of what is meant by this wisdom, which is the “*principal thing.*” We all know the import of the term in its general use. We say there is no wisdom in such and such a plan, or there is a sad want of wisdom in such and such a person: but this is not the wisdom so highly praised by Solomon as a tree of life; or rather, it is but a very small leaf on that tree—in many cases, a plucked leaf—ay, a withered leaf. We seek for a higher conception when we read,

“The Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens . . . The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old.”

We shall seek not in vain if we seek with diligence and with earnest and loving purpose. The scorner seeketh wisdom and findeth it not: the mammon-hunter hunts wisdom in vain. Yet—

“How much better is it to get wisdom than gold! and to get understanding rather to be chosen than silver!” (Prov. 16:16).

Wisdom, then, in its most elementary conception, is the power and disposition to adapt means to the accomplishment of good ends. Such an adaptation we see everywhere in nature—in superlative degree—in the most exquisite form—whether we look at matters large or matters small. Who can look at the starry universe without being impressed with the wonderful balancing of stupendous power for the preservation and benefit of every part? But we do not require to mount the heavens in search of wisdom. “*The unwearied sun from day to day*” is truly a mighty preacher to “*reason’s ear,*” and the moon that walketh in brightness at night, and the stars that glitter in the sky: but we learn the same lesson in much lower flights. Consider the composition of the atmosphere: consider the constitution of the earth: consider the structure of the vegetation that flourishes upon it. Examine the tiniest blade of grass, the meanest insect, the commonest animal: they all exemplify, in the most perfect manner, the adaptation of means to ends—beneficent ends. Yea, this prevailing wisdom is more prevailing still. There are creatures we cannot see: here also, when the microscope makes them visible, we behold the most perfect mechanical contrivances for fulfilling the objects of being. In our own bodies, we carry about a whole world of such contrivances. Our general structure is a masterpiece of wisdom: our constitution in detail is an almost endless series of wise appliances, not to speak of the wonderful apparatus of digestion and assimilation, the fibre of every muscle, the minute vessels of every blood-

holding part, yea, the discs in every drop of blood strike the highest intelligence dumb with admiration of the wisdom with which all things have been contrived.

Here is wisdom in heaven and earth: above, below, around, within: yet another idea is evidently wanting to connect this wisdom with the wisdom so much commended by Solomon—the wisdom of individual practice. We find it as we proceed. The wisdom we see in heaven and earth is wisdom mechanically applied—wisdom applied to substances and things which are passive and plastic in the hands of Eternal Power. But in man, we have an additional phenomenon—a being made in the image of that Eternal Power—a being endowed with intelligence and volition—a being possessed of a rational will, having the power of choice—the power to do, or not do, as may seem to him the best. Now, the question is, how is this God-like power to be used? Much depends on the answer. It may be used in a way that will bring destruction and misery: it may be used in a way that will bring life and blessing and gladness. Here, as in all other cases, wisdom consists in the adoption of right means for the right ends: but who knows what are the right ends? and who knows what are the right means for reaching those ends? As a matter of fact, man left to himself does not know. This is shown by all his history, and by the universal experience of the present hour. God, who made him, knows. God, whose wisdom is manifest in the sky and in the earth, and in every physical thing that we can know anything about, knows how the gift of a free will should be used so as to lead to the blessedness there is in it when rightly used; and God, who has this knowledge, has made it known to us. And hence it is that what is Scripturally revealed is connected with the wisdom that made heaven and earth. The wisdom that made the one has revealed the other; so that the man who obeys the voice of God, made scripturally audible, is in harmony with the wisdom that has so wonderfully contrived all things around us. The Bible is that wisdom applied to us which gave the bee its constructive talent, and the sun its earth-gladdening light.

To be without this application of Almighty wisdom is to be forlorn indeed. It is to be put out of joint with wisdom everywhere. What boots it to a man that the universe is splendid and great, and full of the arrangements of wisdom, if he himself is at war with that wisdom, as applied to him? Of what advantage that he knows the distances of the planets, the magnitudes of the stellar system, the laws of light and electricity—yea, if he be filled with the knowledge of all natural things—of what advantage is it all to him if he himself know not how to fulfil the object of his existence in creation? It is like a man admiring the sun who is cast away in an open boat at sea without food or water; or praising the productiveness of British soil when he is obliged to wander the streets without a penny to buy a loaf of bread.

The wisdom that made all things has spoken concerning the ways that will lead man to life and peace; and our wisdom—our only wisdom, is to listen and obey. This wisdom is beautifully personified as a mentor thus:

“Unto you, O men, I call: and my voice is to the sons of men. O ye simple, understand wisdom: and ye fools, be ye of an understanding heart. Hear, for I will speak of excellent things: and the opening of my lips shall be right things. For my mouth shall speak truth: and wickedness is an abomination to my lips. All the words of my mouth are in righteousness: there is nothing froward or perverse in them. They are all plain to him that understandeth, and right to them that find knowledge. Receive my instruction, and not silver; and knowledge rather than choice gold. For wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it” (Prov. 8:4-11).

Again we read,

“Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies:

and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. Length of days is in her right hand; and in her left hand riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her” (3:13-18).

There is much of figure in this, but how much of obvious literal truth is conveyed in the figure. When a man understands, receives, and continuously obeys the instruction and the commandments delivered by divine authority in the Scriptures, and intended for him, he embraces the “wisdom” of this beautiful parabolic discourse, and will certainly realise the pleasant results depicted. When Moses had placed before Israel all the statutes and commandments he was authorised to deliver to them, he said,

“Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the Lord my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the land whither ye go to possess it. Keep therefore and do them: for THIS IS YOUR WISDOM.”

We, Gentiles (invited to adoption through Christ), are not called upon to obey these Mosaic commandments—but the same voice, the same authority, has appointed to us other commandments, suited to the purposes of the dispensation in which we live. These are the commandments of Christ, who enjoined his apostles to teach all nations to observe them, and who said those only were his friends who kept them. Concerning these, the words of Moses may well be addressed to us,

*“Keep therefore and do them: for **this is your wisdom.**”*

Wisdom takes this shape to us: Christ is made unto us wisdom; in him are filled up all its treasures.

Now, it is testified to us, concerning this personal application of wisdom, that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of it:

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

We live in a day when nothing meaningless could be uttered in the general ear. In the common estimation, whether expressed conventionally, educationally, or scientifically, the fear of the Lord, so far from being the beginning of wisdom, is an obstruction to all wisdom—an impediment in the way of obtaining it. To most of us it has doubtless seemed at one time as if this general verdict were a true one. Personally, I can recollect the time (now long gone by) when the statement that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, seemed only so much pious jingle. How different the case seems now. The words are simply true—absolutely true—uncontradictably, scientifically, precisely true, as every man of any true capacity of observation and reflection is bound to discover. Without the fear of the Lord, how is a man to obey commandments which run against the natural grain? The commandments of Christ forbid us to do many things we like to do, as natural men—to retaliate, to avenge ourselves, to hoard up treasure upon earth; they command us to do things that we do not like to do as natural men—to be patient with the evil, to suffer wrong, to do good to our enemies. How can a man do such things without the motive power—the fear of the Lord? Experience will show it to be impossible. A man is not to be trusted in the long run who fears not God. He may be kept on the track for a while at the beginning, by the secondary influences that affect all men more or less; but as these, one by one, get worn away by the friction of time, if the fear of God be not the kernel of his mental composition, he will act the part of the natural man, and do those things only that are agreeable to himself, without reference to what Christ has required at his hands. The fear of man will keep a man straight in many things; but in times of temptation—when the eye of man has no bearing—when a man is left only to the power of what is in his own heart—if the fear of God be not there, he will go wrong and depart from wisdom to his destruction. *“I fear God,”* said Joseph when giving his brethren a guarantee that he would do rightly by them. If a man is not able to say this

truly, there is not much reliance to be placed on him. To “*fear God and keep his commandments,*” is Solomon’s summary of the whole duty of man. There is no other rule of wisdom or line of safety. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. A man who has not acquired this, has not made a beginning on the road that leadeth unto life.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom in another sense. Wisdom is not in man. Man is only a permitted form of the wisdom-guided power of God—a creature that comes into the world without any knowledge, made by wisdom, but himself without it; who acquires wisdom by slow and painful methods, if he acquire it at all, and who, when he acquires it, has acquired it all from without, and from that which was before him. Wisdom is of God from eternity. It not only precedes man; it preceded the earth, and the physical universe.

“The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth” (Prov. 8:22-25).

Thus speaks the personified wisdom of God by the inspired mouth of Solomon. In this sense, God and wisdom are inseparable. Wisdom, or the power and disposition skilfully to adapt means to ends, is the characteristic of the Eternal Father inhabiting unapproachable light, and radiated in boundless immensity. Scriptural praise is “*to God only wise.*” Wisdom dwells with Him, and intrinsically with Him alone. Now, it is testified,

“He hath made all things for Himself.”

Upon earth His highest workmanship is man; and His highest delight in earth-direction is to receive man’s adoration and obedience. A man who does not fear Him is without interest to Him: a man who disobeys Him is an offence to Him.

“He taketh pleasure in them that fear him, and in them that hope in his mercy.”

A man may profit himself by his energy and skill: but of what profit is he to the Almighty if he fear Him not? It will turn out at last all in vain if this is lacking: but let a man abound in this, even if lacking in other directions, he is in the way of life, for the approbation of God will secure every good thing in the end. So it is written,

*“No good thing will the Lord withhold from **them that fear him.**”*

The first commandment is:

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and strength, and mind.”

Hence nothing acceptable can be offered to God without the fear of the Lord, which is thus the beginning of wisdom.

We stand in much need in such an age as this of remembering this feature of the wisdom which belongs to the house of Christ. We live in an age when God’s name is scarcely mentioned except in profanity; and when there is no more effectual way of earning the reputation of soft-brained folly than to allege the fear of God as a reason for your course in any matter. If God’s name is not mentioned in profanity, then it is in the insincerity of cant, which is little better. Between the extravagances of an unscriptural devotionism on the one hand, and the chilling exactitudes of a science atheistically applied on the other, it is a difficult thing to find and keep the medium path of true wisdom. But such a medium path is to be found; and happy the man who, finding it, keeps it. The fear of the Lord, which is rational and sincere, is to be found now as it ever has been found. How did men come to fear the Lord in the apostolic or prophetic ages? Not by inspiration, but by knowledge divinely revealed and acting upon their reason. Men love where they know. Acquaintance is the first condition of friendship. Hence the scriptural injunction:

“Acquaint now thyself with him, and be at peace.”

This process of acquaintance is further defined as a drawing nigh:

“Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you.”

Again, further, as a seeking:

“Seek the Lord while he may be found; draw nigh to him while he is near.”

We have no prophet in our midst at whose mouth we may enquire of the Lord. We have no temple to which we can go, and do homage with peace-offering before the manifested presence of Deity. But we have the essence of all these privileges in possessing the Scriptures of the truth. Men could do no more in ancient days than obtain access to the divine mind, and become acquainted with the divine character and the divine will. The most in which they differed from us was that in some cases they could obtain the mind of the Lord in a given dilemma. This was a great privilege. Still, the greater privilege of becoming acquainted with the revealed character of God, His will, His law, His purpose, is equally ours **if we make it so.**

Ah, much depends upon the last five words. Men reap as they sow even now. If we are content with a one-talent knowledge of the truth—if we rest upon that mere outline-knowledge of the Scriptures which leads to the belief and obedience of the gospel—if having become sufficiently enlightened to put on the name of Christ, we thenceforth leave the subject at rest, and devote our energies to other knowledge, and other pleasures, and other cares, we shall never attain to that knowledge of God that results in His love and fear; we shall never become subject to that rich indwelling of the word of Christ which Christ desires in those to be chosen. Wisdom is not to be attained with a slack hand.

“Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding.”

But she is not to be got with less effort than men usually put forth in other gettings. On this point, we have all been more or less spoiled at the start by the loose and unscriptural views that are in circulation in almost all religious communities. It is everywhere represented that salvation is an easy thing; that, in fact, you have only to allow yourself to be saved; that you almost put God under obligation in consenting to let Him save you. How contrary to scriptural representations of the matter. Truly, it is *“without money and without price”* that we are invited to wisdom’s feast; and truly the yoke of Christ is easy, and the burden is light; but to the feast we must come and stay; the yoke we must put on and wear. To each of us the Spirit says,

“Incline thine ear to wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding . . . cry after knowledge . . . lift up thy voice for understanding . . . seek her as silver, and search for her as for hid treasure. Then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God.”

The spirit of God in the apostolic writings speaks not differently. Jesus speaks of **striving** (more literally **agonising**) to enter into the kingdom of God; and Paul, of *“working out our salvation with fear and trembling.”*

Now to what does all this come in plain language? —though I do not know that language could be much plainer. Does it not come to this, that we must make ourselves continual and studious readers of the Scriptures? —readers who aim not only to understand, but, in their actual lives to carry out the principles and the commandments contained therein? Few would demur to this proposition in the abstract; but many deceive themselves and others by simply saying “Amen” to the theory, and neglecting to do that which is necessary to carry it out. They praise wisdom in the abstract, but leave her unappropriated and unsought after. They re-echo good words about the Bible, but leave the Bible unattended to. They acknowledge the Bible to be the word of God, but they give the chief place in their lives to the words and the works of man. They give to the affairs and the friendships of this present

life the best of their vigorous attention with the rising of every sun; but a daily attention to the unfading life to come, in the daily reading of the Scriptures, sinks either to a languid or a neglected performance, or, worse still, to a performance that they oppose or speak deprecatingly of, as of questionable utility.

Brethren and sisters, as you value the right ending of the whole matter; as you value the verdict, at the end of the journey; as you value the satisfaction of an approving conscience; as you value the sweetness of an acquaintance with wisdom; as you value the friendship of Almighty God for mortal man; as you value an immortal life when our present shadowy days upon earth shall have run; as you value a joyful harvest from a bountiful seed sowing; as you value the haven of rest in the kingdom of God, when the toil and the conflict of present probation are over, take the right side on this question. Leave to themselves the mistaken men who preach smooth things. Make yourselves one with the men after God's own heart, who have said

“Oh how love I Thy law. It is my meditation all the day. Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. How sweet are thy words unto my taste, yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth . . . I esteem the words of Thy mouth more than my necessary food.”

To such, the wisdom of heaven and earth thus speaks:

“Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord; but he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul: all they that hate me love death.”

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