

Our Wise Friends: Engaging with Wisdom Literature of the Bible

Participant's Guide

Wisdom Literature Study 1: What is Wisdom?

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Proverbs 1:7

Opening

- How would you define wisdom?
- When you hear the word “wisdom” is there someone in your life who comes to mind?
- When you hear the word “wisdom” is there someone in the Bible who comes to mind?
- Are knowledge and wisdom the same thing?
- Can you have wisdom without knowledge?
- Can you have knowledge without wisdom?

Digging into the Word

In Proverbs 8, wisdom is personified. Read Proverbs 8:22-33

- Which existed first: wisdom or creation?
- Who is the source of this wisdom?

Now read Proverbs 3:5-7

- What does this tell us about the relationship between faith and wisdom?
- Can a person truly be wise without looking to the Lord in faith? Why or why not?
- What does it mean to be “wise in your own eyes?”

In the classic book, “The Pilgrim’s Progress” there is a character known as “Mr. Worldly Wiseman.” If you have never read this book, it is an allegory with the protagonist, Christian, who is journeying from his hometown to the “Celestial City.” This book mentions beliefs not in line with the LCMS, but this section can be helpful in considering what wisdom is or is not.

In the section below, Mr. Worldly Wiseman gives advice to the pilgrim.

"But why do you seek for ease in this perilous way," asked Worldly-wiseman, "seeing that so many dangers attend it? Especially since, had you but sense to listen to me—I could direct you how to obtain what you desire, without all these dangers! Yes, and with my remedy, you shall gain much safety, friendship, and happiness!"

"Please, Sir—reveal this secret to me!" begged Christian.

Worldly-wiseman began, "Why, in yonder village named Morality—there dwells a gentleman whose name is Legality. He is a very sensible man, having a good reputation—who has ability to help remove such burdens like yours. Yes, to my knowledge, he has done a great deal of good this way—and besides, he has skill to cure those who are somewhat crazed in their minds, because of their burdens. To him you may go, and be helped in a very short while. His house is not quite a mile from here; and if he should not be at home himself—his handsome young son, whose name is Civility, can help you as well as the old gentleman himself!"

"There, I say, you may be eased of your heavy burden; and if you do not want to return to the City of Destruction, and I encourage you not to return—you may send for your wife and children to join you in this village. In the town of Morality, there are many vacant houses—one of which you may have at a reasonable rate. It is inexpensive to live there—and all the neighbors are honest and fashionable. To be sure—this will make your life more happy."

Now Christian was somewhat in a dilemma; but he shortly concluded, that if what this gentleman had said was true—then his wisest course was to take the advice of Worldly-wiseman.¹

- Mr. Worldly Wiseman gives advice that happiness can be found in civility and legality. "The Pilgrim's Progress" was written about 350 years ago. If this were to be written today, to what do you think Mr. Worldly Wiseman might direct the pilgrim as a source of happiness?
- What instructions do we receive from the "wisdom" of our age?

One example in the Bible of being "wise in your own eyes" can be found in Genesis 3, where Adam and Eve think that they are being wise, but truly they are being foolish.

Read Genesis 3:1-7

- Adam and Eve were tempted with the promise of knowledge. Was the knowledge gained beneficial for them or harmful?
- The craftiness of the serpent caused Adam and Eve to think that they were acting wisely while they were actually being foolish. Can you think of any similar temptations that are faced today? Are there ways that seem wise to the world, but are actually foolish?
- How can we gain clarity about whether something is wise or foolish?

Catechism Connection

The First Commandment

You shall have no other gods.

What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

Conclusion

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

- What did Jews seek?
- What did Greeks seek?
- What message do we have?
- How is that message regarded by the world?
- How does wisdom help us to endure in the faith?

¹ <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/bunyan/The%20Pilgrim's%20Progress%20-%20John%20Bunyan.pdf>

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Wisdom Literature Study 2: Proverbs

Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.

Proverbs 11:14

Opening

According to one scholar, “Functionally, very often one could define ‘wisdom’ then as ‘ability to cope’—with life in its broadest dimensions, as well as with specific tasks.”²

In this study of Wisdom Literature, we’re going to consider the wisdom from Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. It might be helpful to think of each of these books as different friends that help you to navigate and cope with life.

We’ll consider Proverbs to be a young, optimistic friend who tends to believe that if you apply wisdom to everyday life, you’re bound to have success.

We’ll consider Job to be the voice of an older, seasoned friend or relative. Job is that friend who has learned through experience to trust in the Lord, even through the darkest of times.

And we’ll consider Ecclesiastes to be a Gen X cynic, who sees through the bologna in life and isn’t afraid to call a thing what it is.

Proverbs

We’ll begin in Proverbs because it’s the book that comes to mind first when people think about wisdom literature in the Bible.

We’re considering the book of Proverbs to be a young, optimistic friend who tends to believe that if you apply wisdom to everyday life, you’re bound to have success. The proverbs do not guarantee a given result. However, the idea is that if you apply the wisdom of these proverbs to your life, in general you will have good results.

Do you have a friend who believes that if you work hard, get good grades, and make good decisions that you’ll be successful in life? That’s a lot like the friend we have in the book of Proverbs.

Let’s consider some of the wisdom from our friend, Proverbs. This is a book that can be a bit more challenging to read than narrative stories. There are different kinds of forms used in Proverbs that are designed to bring wisdom to light. We can better understand how to read the book when we know what formats we might see. Here are a few types of proverbs.

- Synonymous Parallelism: Read Proverbs 19:29
 - The two parts of this proverb are reinforcing the same idea.
 - What point is made in the first clause of this proverb?
 - What point is made in the second clause of this proverb?
 - How do the clauses reinforce the same idea?
- Contrast Parallelism: Read Proverbs 13:9
 - The two parts in this kind of proverb bring wisdom to light through contrasting truths.

² Hummel, Horace D., *The Word Becoming Flesh* p. 389

- What point is made in the first clause of this proverb?
- What point is made in the second clause of this proverb?
- How does the contrast help us to better understand these truths?
- Contemplative Parallelism: Read Proverbs 20:2
 - The second clause develops the thought of the first clause.
 - What point is made in the first clause of this proverb?
 - What point is made in the second clause of this proverb?
 - How does the second clause develop on the first clause?

Reading Proverbs

The book of Proverbs can be outlined in much greater detail, but for the purpose of our study today we're going to divide it like this: The first section (chapters 1-9) is about the superior way of wisdom and the second section (chapters 10-31) is a collection of wise proverbs that help us to live wisely.

Let's begin with a look at a section about the superior way of wisdom.

Read Proverbs 1:1-19

- What does verse 7 say about wisdom and foolishness?
- Solomon, in this section, warns against the temptation to depart from the way of wisdom.
 - How are wisdom and faith related?
 - How are foolishness and sinfulness related?
- What does Solomon say is the beginning of wisdom?
- What is the fear of the Lord?

Now let's look at a section from the second part of Proverbs in which we find some of those pithy proverbs.

Read Proverbs 22:1-16

- Is there a proverb that particularly resonates with you?
- Is there a proverb that you don't quite understand?
- Read verse 6: Is this a promise or a general truth/probability?
- Read verse 1 again:
 - Do you think most people in our society would agree with this?
 - How does this proverb relate to the 8th Commandment?
 - How does this commandment relate to the 2nd Commandment?

Endure

While the proverbs are often thought of as "tips for successful living" in the here and now, we know that we don't always follow God's guidance in our lives. We sometimes depend on our own wisdom, speak too quickly, and do all the things wisdom says not to do. Yet, God still forgives us and work through us. God continues to speak through this book to help us to walk in His ways. If we read Proverbs apart from Christ, we misread it.

Wisdom begins by looking in faith to Jesus. *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight."* (Proverbs 9:10)

Now read Hebrews 12:1-3

- How can Proverbs help us to endure in our Christian walk?
- How can Proverbs help us to stay focused on Jesus?



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Wisdom Literature Study 3: Job

Opening

In these studies, we're gaining wisdom from our friends Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. If our first study we considered Proverbs. Remember, Proverbs is a bit like a young, optimistic friend who tends to believe that if you apply wisdom to everyday life, you're bound to have success. Follow the ways of wisdom and blessings will come! Through Proverbs, we know that God is the source of wisdom for us to follow, even when we fail to do so.

Today we'll consider Job. Job is like the voice of an older, seasoned friend or relative. Job is that friend who has learned through experience to trust in the Lord, even though the darkest of times.

If Proverbs presupposes that if you do A then B will happen, Job wrestles with the question of what happens when you do A, but B doesn't happen. What happens when you fear, love, and trust in God and still things crumble around you. Can it be that you can do the right things and still have bad things happen to you?

Meet Job

Read Job 1:1-5

- Describe Job.
- How did he show his devotion to the Lord?

Read Job 1:6-19

- Why did Satan attack Job?
- Who brought Job to Satan's attention?
- What did Satan do to Job?

Read Job 1:20-22

- How did Job respond to all of this tragedy?

Read Job 2:1-10

- After all that Satan had already done to Job, what did he do on top of that?
- How did Job respond?
- For much of the rest of the book of Job, three friends try to give Job answers as to why these things happened to him and Job contends that they're wrong. Many of the chapters are long back and forth conversations between Job and these friends.
- The friends offer what they see as human wisdom for why bad things might happen. In fact, they may be things you have heard before: platitudes intended to comfort, confrontation claiming that Job must have done something wicked for God to do this to him, and even claiming that there's no hope of getting justice before God because God is so much greater than man.
- Each of these friends gets it wrong. In Job's case, the suffering wasn't brought about because he had acted wickedly, but because he had acted righteously. And in the end God does come to Job's aid and blesses Job greatly.

Why

An underlying question in the book of Job is, “Why?” This is a question often asked by people when suffering comes.

Why did I develop cancer?

Why did my friend die?

Why did I get fired?

Why didn't I get into the college I wanted to attend?

We often think that if only we could know why, then we could deal with things.

But Job tells us that God doesn't always give us an answer of why something happened. And even more emphatically, that God doesn't owe us an answer.

We know that Job suffers, not because of his unrighteousness, but because he acted rightly. But in the end, even when God confronts Job and His friends, God doesn't give Him an answer. In chapters 38-41 God speaks, but God doesn't answer the question of why.

Read Job 38:1-21 to get a taste of the Lord's reply to Job and his friends.

- Does God owe us an explanation for why things happen?
- Can it be difficult to trust God when things are hard, especially when you don't understand why something is happening?
- How can you endure in the faith when you're suffering?

Endure

Even as Job was lamenting his suffering, even as he was inquiring of the Lord, he was living by faith.

One of the great confessions of faith comes from Job in chapter 19:23-27. Read these verses:

- What is Job's great confession?
- Can you think of a similar confession we make in one of the creeds used in worship?
- When we can't understand God's ways, how can looking to Jesus' help?

Read Romans 8:31-39

- In the midst of hard times, what promises can we hold fast to?
- Did God abandon Job?
- Does God abandon us?

In the end, Job was greatly blessed by God (42:12-17). These new blessings didn't mean that the suffering Job experienced was forgotten, but Job knew God's wisdom defied anything he could begin to understand. We know that if we endure in faith we can look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.



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Wisdom Literature Study 4: Ecclesiastes

Opening

Today we consider Ecclesiastes in which we hear the voice of a Gen X cynic, who sees through the bologna in life and isn't afraid to call a thing what it is.

- True or False: If you make wise decisions, you will always be successful in life. Explain why you think that.
- Would you like to be famous? Why or why not?

In the 1990s there was a phrase that became popular and was printed on t-shirts, bumper stickers, and the like; the phrase was “He who dies with the most toys wins.”

30 years later, that mindset still seems to be prevalent. Do you have the latest i-phone? Do you have brand name clothes? The newest game system? The newest Jordans?

- What are some of the “toys” that are must have for you?
- What are some of the “toys” that are must have for others?

This same mindset of “He who dies with the most toys wins” existed 3000 years, when Ecclesiastes was written. The author of Ecclesiastes said then that the pursuit of stuff was empty; and that wisdom still rings true today.

Vanity

The author of the book of Ecclesiastes calls himself the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Though the name Solomon never appears in this book, it is implied by these words that he was the author and this has been widely accepted throughout the history of the church.

Solomon is a man who had experience far more than almost anyone who had lived before him. His wealth was vast, his fame was international, and his power was impressive. But it seems that an older, wiser, Solomon was looking back on all of this and recognizing that none of it truly satisfied.

The book famously begins with these words: *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 1:2).* When something is vain, it is empty. It doesn't satisfy. It doesn't last.

The word translated as “vanity” here is the Hebrew word “hebel” [הבל] means something along the lines of “breath.” A breath is here and then gone. It doesn't last.

Solomon wants the reader to know that most things don't last and the pursuit of many things don't actually satisfy.

- What are some things that you wanted, received, but didn't last?
- What kinds of things do people pursue, but when reaching the goal, they're still not satisfied?

Ecclesiastes

Solomon writes from a position of experience. Let's look at some of the things he pursued, but found wanting.

- Read Ecclesiastes 1:12-18
- Read Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

What did Solomon seek and find to be vanity? Why do you think these things didn't satisfy him?

- Look at the headings throughout the rest of the book. What else did Solomon find to be vanity? List the subject headings for the corresponding section of Scripture:
 - 2:12-17
 - 2:18-26
 - 5:8-6:12
- Why do you think that these things fall short of bringing satisfaction?

Does building a social media following bring real satisfaction? How quickly can someone go from viral to forgotten?

How about success on the athletic field? How long does that last? What happens when you get hurt or can no longer play?

If you're an elite student, does that mean anyone will really remember you? Who will know your test scores when you are an adult?

Solomon recognized that we will all be forgotten by the world and the success we have doesn't last. And so, those things that bring the greatest joy and lasting satisfaction are found in the Lord and enjoying His created order.

- Read 3:9-13
 - What is the point of doing anything if it's all fleeting and doesn't matter? God gives us tasks to do through which we can love others and share the good news of Jesus. God has given us roles and responsibilities where we are so that we can care for His creation and through the Holy Spirit, find the joy in repairing a little bit of this broken world with God's love.
 - What is the point of everything? To have saving faith in God and to share that with others. That is what lasts beyond what we understand now.
- Read 9:7-10
 - Solomon encourages the reader to enjoy the blessings God has given.
 - What value is there in "staying in the moment" rather than pining for the past or thinking about the future?
 - How do you think it might impact you if you spent your days being thankful for the blessings God has given you and enjoying those blessings rather than thinking about what you don't have?

Endure

- Read 12:13-14

In the end, Solomon reminds us that the ultimate meaning in life can only be found by keeping our focus on the Lord and walking in His ways.

- Compare the ending of Ecclesiastes with Hebrews 12:1-3
 - What is the focus in each of these readings?
 - Can we find joy, even though the vanity of life, if we have the right focus?
 - How can the suffering and death of Jesus, and His willingness to forgive an love those who cause the suffering, encourage us to "run with endurance?"