Pursuing Wisdom

God promises to provide His wisdom to those who search for Him.

Recently all of my adult children and their families came home for a visit. My wife and I always enjoy times when the extended family gets together. One of my favorite activities is playing games with the grandchildren. On this particular occasion, the youngsters decided they wanted to play hide-and-seek inside the house. Some of the younger kids hid themselves behind a door or under a bed. One older grandson crammed himself into the space beneath my desk and pulled the chair back into place to further conceal his presence. However, the prize for best concealment that day went to a granddaughter. She hid in a walk-in closet in our master bedroom. There was just enough space behind the hanging clothing for her to stand without disturbing the orderly appearance of the garments. Moreover, she quietly stood inside a pair of my shoes that were arrayed in a neat line on the floor. The illusion was amazing! Soon all the children joined me in looking for her, but we were unsuccessful until she finally decided to reveal her location. Some of them had even opened the closet door but failed to see her.

Life can sometimes resemble a game of hide-and-seek. We constantly are searching for something. Have you ever asked questions such as, “What is right thing for me to do?” “Should I take this new job offer in another state?” “How do I answer my child’s request to participate in a popular fad?” Sometimes the answers to life’s questions are in plain sight. Often they appear to be hiding from us. The search for God’s will in any situation is a search for wisdom.

Wisdom may be defined as the appropriate application of knowledge. In any given situation, we sort through what we know and seek to select the information that is relevant to our circumstances. According to the Book of Proverbs, true knowledge comes from an understanding of God’s nature and our human frailty (Prov. 1:7). Wisdom rests upon these same truths (Prov. 9:10). Hence, the acquisition of both knowledge and wisdom begins with seeking God. As Solomon emphasized in the Bible passage for this session, God promises to provide His wisdom to those who search for Him.
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PROVERBS 8:1–9:18

Proverbs 1–9 forms a literary unit in which Solomon addressed his sons. He admonished them as young adults to continue behaving in the way of wisdom their parents had taught them. Some of Solomon's instructions were general in nature—for example, the counsel to avoid wicked companions (1:8-19). Some instructions were more specific, such as the warning to shun adultery (6:20–7:5). Still other teachings were graphic and well-defined, such as the danger of seducing a married woman (7:6-27), while other sections are more poetic and figurative (see 5:15-19). Within this last category are passages in which abstract ideas such as wisdom are described through the literary device of personification (see 1:20-33). In Hebrew thought, however, personification was not meant to make a pagan idol out of an attribute. Rather, it was meant to explain the one true God’s infinite and perfect nature in understandable (human) terms. In other words, true wisdom was from God and yet was practical. It was (and is) worth searching for!

Solomon again used personification in discussing godly wisdom in Proverbs 8:1–9:18. In 8:1-5, he described wisdom as a vendor hawking her wares in the marketplace. In 8:6-21, he recounted her sales pitch for acquiring wisdom. The passage clearly reveals the advantage of acquiring wisdom.

Proverbs 8:22-31 establishes the antiquity of wisdom. The passage opens with an assertion that the Lord already possessed wisdom at the beginning of creation (8:22). Indeed, wisdom preceded the creation (8:23-29). It was, in fact, the fundamental principle and pattern for the design for creation (9:30).

Proverbs 8:32-36 lays out wisdom’s plea for God’s people to choose wisdom as their way of life. Wisdom states that listening to her appeal makes one “happy” (8:33-34). Listening implies more than hearing the sounds of her entreaty. One must live as she instructs. Living in accordance with wisdom’s teaching generates the best life possible for each individual within the constraints of God’s will for his or her life (8:35). In the Hebrew language, the words for love and hate have the sense of choosing and rejecting, respectively. Hence, to reject wisdom is to choose death (8:36).

In Proverbs 9:1-18, Solomon set up a contrast between wisdom’s entreaty that leads to life (9:1-12) and the call of folly (foolishness) that leads to death (9:13-18). Wisdom is described as inviting people to a banquet in her house. The house is strong and spacious. The table is set with life-giving food and drink. Folly, on the other hand, is like a boisterous woman preying on naïve individuals passing by her house. Those who agree to her solicitation end up in Sheol, the place of the dead. The point is clear: Choose wisdom!
VALUABLE (Prov. 8:6-11)

Solomon portrayed God’s wisdom as perfect and righteous in every way. God’s wisdom is more valuable than any precious metal or gemstone.

VERSE 6

Listen, for I speak of noble things, and what my lips say is right.

Proverbs 8:1-4 personifies wisdom as a female vendor peddling her wares in the marketplace. The marketplace is crowded with shoppers haggling with other vendors over the price of their merchandise. Still other merchants screech loudly to attract customers in their direction. Wisdom, however, has no permanent stall. Instead, she roams around the community marketing her product wherever people congregate. Her target audience is “the children of Adam” (Prov. 8:4)—in other words, all human beings. Her cry is for people to heed her instruction.

The Hebrew term rendered listen involves not only hearing words of wisdom but also heeding them. The call to listen functions to draw attention to what Lady Wisdom is about to say. People must intentionally tune out the other voices clamoring for attention in the busy marketplace of life and pay attention to the wisdom that comes from God. It is godly wisdom alone that can meet their deepest needs.

Wisdom promises that she speaks of noble things (“excellent things,” KJV; “trustworthy things,” NIV). The Hebrew word rendered noble has the root meaning of “placing a matter conspicuously before a person.” The noun form can designate a king or high priest. Such persons are conspicuous because of their leadership roles in society. Here the word is plural and functions as an adjective.

Further, wisdom claims that her words deserve attention because they are right. The Hebrew term refers to being ethically and morally straight as well as approved by God. The point is clear: Godly wisdom offers people practical instruction about life that is of the highest value and purest nature. It comes from the mind of God and guarantees that those who obey it will experience life to the full as God intended when He created human beings.

VERSE 7

For my mouth tells the truth, and wickedness is detestable to my lips.
Wisdom goes on to assure people that her **mouth tells the truth.** The human lungs act as a bellows that pushes air through the mouth. The shape and movement of the lips and tongue control the air flow out of the mouth. This variation in the air flow produces a variety of sounds. The different sounds are combined to form languages that enable humans to communicate with one another. The wide variety of sounds possible facilitates complex and abstract ideas to be shared with other people.

Human experience shows that people can use their speech helpfully or hurtfully. As James 3:10 acknowledges, “Blessing and cursing [can] come out of the same mouth,” but then goes on to say “these things should not be this way.” Lady Wisdom affirms that things are definitely not that way with her speech. **Wickedness is detestable to** (“an abomination to,” KJV; ESV) her **lips.** Godly wisdom can be trusted to be true, right, helpful, and fulfilling. Wickedness is behavior that is contrary to God’s character. It is the opposite of truth. Wisdom finds such conduct to be repugnant, and therefore wisdom’s guidance can never be wicked. Whatever wisdom communicates will harmonize with God’s own perfect character.

**VERSE 8**

**All the words from my mouth are righteous; none of them are deceptive or perverse.**

This verse employs the same form of parallelism as the previous verse. The first line sets forth a positive statement. Everything wisdom says is **righteous.** Righteous denotes that which God determines to be right. Every authentic word of wisdom produces attitudes and actions that are acceptable to God.

Whereas the first line expresses the godly nature of wisdom’s speech, the second line identifies qualities wisdom does not possess. Wisdom’s words are never **deceptive** (“froward,” KJV; “twisted,” ESV; “crooked,” NIV). Neither are her instructions **perverse** (“crooked,” ESV). Deceptive speech leads the hearer along false and destructive ways. Similarly, **perverse** words distort the truth of God into misleading instruction. The twisting of God’s truth into wickedness reveals the foolish speaker’s sinful character.

**VERSE 9**

**All of them are clear to the perceptive, and right to those who discover knowledge.**

This verse expands the message of the previous verse. Throughout these initial chapters in Proverbs, the reader is challenged with a choice between wisdom and folly. Folly, or foolishness, has more to do with character than intelligence; it is the propensity to make self-destructive choices.
These hurtful choices arise from the fact that foolish people are self-centered and obstinate. Their reliance on their own insight makes them gullible and greedy. Therefore, they reject the guidance of true wisdom.

The correctness of wisdom’s guidance is best understood by those who have made progress along her path. The message of wisdom is forthright and desirable to those who are seeking to know and honor God. The Hebrew word rendered clear literally means “to be in front of.” Hence, it has the sense of straightness as opposed to being twisted or crooked.

Godly wisdom is easily grasped once a person accepts it as truth. Knowledge refers to a relational understanding of people or objects. In the first nine chapters of Proverbs, the term primarily focuses on comprehension gained through theological contemplation. As an individual accepts God’s wisdom as true, it makes more and more sense. As that person meditates on what God says, wisdom’s accuracy and application become even more apparent.

VERSE 10

Accept my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than pure gold.

The Bible mentions gold more than any other metal. It was (and is) valued for its beauty, rarity, and workability. Gold can be molded without difficulty into objects or art or functionality. Thus, it has long been fabricated into jewelry, idols, utensils, and coinage. Silver is another valuable metal. Like gold, it has long been used in both jewelry and coinage. Solomon used these two precious metals to emphasize wisdom’s far greater value for successful living.

Instruction refers to correction that leads to education. In the present life, we will make mistakes; we will sometimes falter in our faith and commit sins. Trying to ignore or self-justify our mistakes and sins only makes matters worse for us. Knowledge refers to insight gained by theological reflection. After his conversion to faith in Christ, the apostle Paul spent three years of such reflection in his hometown of Tarsus before launching his missionary ministry (see Gal. 1:17-19). One area of new knowledge for Paul concerned the Scriptures. His understanding of the Scriptures as revealed in his epistles shows that his faith in Christ gave new meaning to Old Testament wisdom. Wisdom reproves bad behavior and instills godly behavior. Learning new truths concerning God’s expectations is far more valuable to life than increasing one’s hoard of silver or gold.

VERSE 11

For wisdom is better than jewels, and nothing desirable can equal it.
God’s wisdom can be trusted as true. Material possessions easily can be wickedly exploited or even squandered. The more valuable that assets might be, the greater the opportunity for wrongful use. However, the real superiority of wisdom is its ability to do what monetary wealth cannot do. Wisdom delivers true happiness and can protect life far better than gold, silver, or jewels. The lesson here is an Old Testament warning similar to Jesus’ admonition in the Sermon on the Mount: “Don’t store up for yourselves treasures on earth,” because the material possessions people desire will eventually decay or corrode and can be stolen by other people who also desire them (Matt. 6:19). Genuine wisdom involves storing up spiritual treasure just as Jesus instructed when He said, “Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matt. 6:20).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Commerce” on pages 320–324 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. What attitudes and activities would you identify as possible evidence that a person truly values godly wisdom over material possessions?

POWERFUL (Prov. 8:12-16)

Solomon declared God’s wisdom as residing in those who fear God. Wisdom empowers kings and provides for justice.

VERSE 12

I, wisdom, share a home with shrewdness and have knowledge and discretion.

Godly wisdom is astute and resourceful. The Hebrew word rendered shrewdness (“prudence,” KJV; ESV; NIV) can also refer to craftiness, as in the conduct of the Gibeonites in Joshua’s day (see Josh. 9:4). During the Israelites’ conquest of Canaan, the citizens of Gibeon recognized their destruction was inevitable if they opposed the Israelite army. Therefore, Gibeonite representatives described themselves as members of a distant people willing to enter into a covenant with the Israelites. Their misrepresentation later resulted in the Gibeonites’ becoming slaves to the Israelites, yet their behavior was seen as shrewd at the time because it saved them from annihilation. In the Book of Proverbs, the term typically exhibits a positive sense of sensible behavior.
The Hebrew term rendered *discretion* ("witty inventions," KJV) has the sense of judicious behavior that results from clear thinking. Wisdom teaches a person how to live a prudent, intelligent, and harmonious life.

**VERSE 13**

*To fear the LORD is to hate evil. I hate arrogant pride, evil conduct, and perverse speech.*

The positive qualities listed in the previous verse arise out of what is stated in this verse. That is, those qualities arise out of a right relationship with God. Solomon previously stated that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7). In 9:10 he reiterated this truth by saying that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” Thus, to be in a right relationship with God is to love Him and to *hate evil.*

The Hebrew verb translated *hate* appears twice in Proverbs 8:13. In Scripture, both love and hate are more than strong feelings. They are accompanied by choices and actions. To *fear the LORD* involves loving Him and choosing to reject any and all actions that are diametrically opposed to His character. The believer guided by godly wisdom thus rejects behaviors such as *arrogant pride, evil conduct, and perverse speech.*

**VERSE 14**

*I possess good advice and sound wisdom; I have understanding and strength.*

In Proverbs 8:14-21, first-person pronouns emphatically stress wisdom's role in benefiting those who seek God. The benefits are both material and spiritual. Life is filled with unexpected events and circumstances that can trigger imprudent and even dangerous behavior if wisdom is forsaken. Wisdom provides *good advice and sound wisdom* for godly living. The purpose of wisdom sharing her home with other virtues relates to this provision. If a person finds wisdom they likewise will discover the other virtues with whom she lives. These include *understanding and strength.* The term rendered *strength* denotes royal power and thus often is ascribed as an attribute of God. The noun is a derivative of a verb that means “to prevail.” Hence, the quality describes the capacity to be victorious in adverse circumstances.

**VERSES 15-16**

*It is by me that kings reign and rulers enact just law; by me, princes lead, as do nobles and all righteous judges.*
Wisdom is essential for making sound decisions. Governing officials need wisdom—not for gaining personal advantage but to lead their people with discernment and justice. **Kings, rulers, princes, nobles,** and **judges** are generic terms for government leaders, not titles for specific offices. The comprehensive list indicates every level of government requires wisdom to function properly. Therefore, government officials, from the head of state to the lowest administrators, govern better by seeking God’s guidance in every decision they make.

Government organization in the ancient Near East differed in significant ways from that in today’s western democracies. In biblical times, monarchs typically held executive, legislative, and judicial roles. At the beginning of his reign, Solomon prayed, “Give your servant a receptive heart to judge your people and to discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of yours?” (1 Kings 3:9). Herein the wisdom literature of Israel separated itself from Egyptian and Mesopotamian wisdom texts. Whereas some wisdom was universal, in Hebrew thought the Lord God was the source of all wisdom.

Solomon’s example also reveals that the pursuit of wisdom is a continuous undertaking, not just a one-time request. In fact, in his later years Solomon failed to continue to seek God’s wisdom and became disobedient to the Lord (see 1 Kings 11:1-13). Consequently, a serious schism developed in the kingdom. At his death, this rift erupted into civil war and the kingdom’s being divided into two separate nations (see 1 Kings 11:31-33; 12:1-19).

God’s wisdom comes through fearing Him. His wisdom enables leaders to govern nations. Therefore, it is more than sufficient for the problems of any individual believer.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Memorize Proverbs 8:13 and 9:10. Besides the attitudes and activities mentioned in 8:13, what are some other things that believers who love God will learn to hate? What are some godly qualities in leaders that believers are wise to emulate?

**OBTAINABLE** (Prov. 8:17-21)

Solomon promised that the person seeking God’s wisdom would find it. The person who lives by God’s wisdom will experience God’s blessings, including the avoidance of self-destructive patterns.
VERSE 17

I love those who love me, and those who search for me find me.

Much of the language and ritual of the Old Testament stressed the vast difference between a holy God and sinful humanity. God was said to be enthroned between the cherubim (see Pss. 80:1; 99:1), a reference to the mercy seat on the ark of the covenant. In Old Testament times, only the high priest could enter the holy of holies where the ark was kept; he could enter on one day only—the Day of Atonement—and then only after carefully purifying himself through sacrifices and offerings. Consequently, one might conclude that the average believer had little hope of relating personally to the Lord. In this verse, wisdom insists that those who seek God will find Him.

As mentioned previously, the Hebrew idea of love was more than a feeling; it also contained elements of choice and action. Thus, those who choose to search for godly wisdom will not be disappointed. The second line promises that those who actively search for wisdom will surely find it. The two lines of this verse are an example of synonymous parallelism in which the second line repeats the first line using alternative words. In other words, both lines have the same meaning. Wisdom is available to those who desire it. Since wisdom is an attribute of God, those who love and search for wisdom also love and search for God.

James 1:5-8 further develops this idea about the search for wisdom. Wisdom can be obtained simply by asking God for it. However, the request must be made in faith that God can and will give the petitioner wisdom. Unlike petitions that may not conform to God’s plans, the petition for wisdom harmonizes with the very nature of God. It is a desire for God Himself and a wish to know Him better. God will not fail to give that believer the wisdom he or she seeks.

VERSE 18

With me are riches and honor, lasting wealth and righteousness.

This verse is another example of synonymous parallelism. Riches and lasting wealth refer to the same concept. Riches is commonplace Hebrew terminology for describing all of one’s assets and wealth. The Hebrew word rendered wealth refers to physical items that can be considered as wealth. The term rendered lasting (“durable,” KJV; “enduring,” ESV; NIV) is an adjective that denotes items that are inherited from one generation to the next.

Wisdom can enable an individual to attain material goods, but not all of wisdom’s benefits are material. The verse also names honor and righteousness as benefits of wisdom. The term honor refers to the respect and appreciation given to someone who is worthy. Righteousness refers
to being in a right relationship with God and displaying qualities that are consistent with that relationship. The essence of this verse is that wisdom’s benefits can be both material and spiritual.

**VERSE 19**

**My fruit is better than solid gold, and my harvest than pure silver.**

Gold and silver were common mediums for commerce. The terms solid and pure describe these two metals in their purest and most desirable condition. Their universal value enabled the purchase of virtually any commodity in any location. Whereas in a barter situation a buyer might not need what the seller had to offer in trade, such a problem would disappear if one of the traders had gold or silver to offer. Yet the fruit and harvest of wisdom outclassed even the possession of the purest of precious metals. When material wealth becomes the sole objective of one’s life, it corrupts that individual and causes him or her to miss out on what truly is valuable.

**VERSES 20-21**

**I walk in the ways of righteousness, along the paths of justice, giving wealth as an inheritance to those who love me, and filling their treasuries.**

Adhering to the principles of wisdom is preferable to schemes for gaining wealth fraudulently. The pursuit of wisdom always adheres to God’s established principles and values. These principles and values are spelled out clearly in the Bible. The persistent study of Scripture will disclose them reliably. Like a path created by generations walking along on the same route, the ways of righteousness never vacillate. Wisdom produces a way of life that holds to ethical behavior and impartiality.

The noun translated as wealth only occurs here in the Old Testament. It is derived from a verb that means “to exist.” In the context of the entire passage, this verse should not be understood as a guaranteed means for gaining material wealth. Instead, it is a lifestyle that leads to a wholesome existence in every way.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “God” on pages 651–653 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. What is the relationship of holiness and love to God’s character?