LESSON 8

Wisdom to Be Thankful For

Ecclesiastes 7:11-29

In this lesson we discover two benefits of wisdom: perspective on life and power for living.

OUTLINE

Life is a puzzle—a process of making disjointed pieces fit together into a big picture. When we know what to do, we lack power. And when we feel empowered, sometimes we don't know what to do. Wisdom is the skill of living—the ability to know what to do and have strength to do it.

I. Thank God for the Perspective of Wisdom
- A. Wisdom to Deal With Prosperity
- B. Wisdom to Deal With Providence
- C. Wisdom to Deal With the Puzzles of Life

II. Thank God for the Power of Wisdom
- A. Wisdom to Deal With the Problems We Encounter
- B. Wisdom to Deal With the People We Employ
- C. Wisdom to Deal With the Perplexities We Experience
- D. Wisdom to Deal With the Pitfalls We Escape

allowed by God so that men should ultimately develop a simple trust and dependence in God. For prosperity and the goods from God's hand, be thankful and rejoice. But in adversity and the crookedness of life, think. Reflect on the goodness of God and the comprehensiveness of His plan for men.

It's easy to give thanks to God for the good times, but are we as quick to thank Him for what we have learned in the crooked places? Wisdom can help us be consistent in dealing with Providence.

When Job lost everything he had in one fell swoop, then lost his health as well, his wife encouraged him to curse God. He responded, "Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?" (Job 2:10) Now that's wisdom! Job had perspective on Providence. He didn't curse God. Instead, he dealt with what he knew, not what he didn't know.

Warren Wiersbe wrote this about wisdom on God's dealing with us:

> God balances our lives by giving us enough blessings to keep us happy and enough burdens to keep us humble. If all we had were blessings in our hands, we would fall right over, so the Lord balances the blessings in our hands with burdens on our backs. That helps keep us steady, and as we yield to Him, we can even turn burdens into blessings.

God balances, by His providence, the blessings and burdens that come into our lives. That balance allows us to stand up straight, bent neither forward nor backward, and continue to look to Him as we walk through this life.

Wisdom to Deal With the Puzzles of Life

Your life is just as busy and complicated as mine is, so you know what I mean when I say life is a puzzle. Every day there are things we can't figure out by ourselves. We need God's wisdom daily to find the pieces for building the big picture.

1. The Puzzle of Reversed Rewards

   Solomon again notes the puzzle of the righteous perishing and the wicked prospering. We dealt with this in an earlier lesson, but here let's note what Solomon says later in this

book: "As you do not know what is the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes everything" (Ecclesiastes 11:5).

We don't, and can't, know the works of God. His ways are higher than our ways, and I worship Him for that very reason. If I could figure out everything about Him, I would not be in awe of Him. If rewards are reversed now, I know that puzzle will be solved one day when God balances the scales of justice.

We see good people suffer and bad people prosper all around us today. Wisdom will not agonize over what it cannot know. Instead we commit those things to the sovereignty of God and wait for Him to conclude His purposes. God is both loving and powerful, so reversed rewards don't exist due to His impotence in some area. There is another reason: the mystery of His will and ways. Remember the woodcutter: We see only a page, a fragment, while God sees the whole story.

2. The Puzzle of Righteous Rhetoric

Solomon's words in these three verses are among the most misunderstood in the book. Liberal interpreters believe Solomon is saying there is no need for extreme holiness, no need to be "overly righteous" (verse 16). Find the middle ground . . . live a little . . . relax and enjoy life . . . nobody's perfect. Solomon definitely says we are to enjoy life, but not at the expense of holiness.

Mediocrity won't get us into heaven, but it will get us into hell. God doesn't grade on the curve. We don't get to heaven by being a little better than the next guy. Solomon is making the point that we are not to go around flaunting our righteousness or our humility. We are to be righteous, but not in a self-promoting way. He is not warning about being too righteous, but about righteous rhetoric that is not backed up by deeds. The way to avoid the ditch of self-righteousness and false humility is to stay in the middle: "It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes" (verse 18, NIV).

Solomon is saying, "Don't get caught up in self-righteousness or false humility." Walk in the fear of God between the two extremes.

Thank God for the Power of Wisdom

Wisdom gives perspective on God's providence, and it also gives power.

Wisdom to Deal With the Problems We Encounter

The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10); and when we fear the Lord, we will not fear any man or "ten rulers of the city" (verse 19). There is power in not living in fear. Remember Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in the book of Daniel? When they were threatened with death by fire, they told King Nebuchadnezzar, "Fine. We trust God. He can rescue us if it's His will. But even if He doesn't, we're not bowing down to you." There is strength in knowing God.

Wisdom to Deal With the People We Employ

We cannot live on an emotional roller coaster based on what people say about us. I had to learn as the pastor of a large church that I can't take to heart every negative criticism I hear. That doesn't mean I disregard the opinions of others; it just means I don't live my life based on "public opinion polls." And you shouldn't either. Listen for God's words to you. If He says or confirms something to your heart, then wisdom will give you power to act on it.

Wisdom to Deal With the Perplexities We Experience

Solomon says, "As for that which is far off and exceedingly deep, who can find it out?" (verse 24) That's wisdom talking. I remember hearing when I was a young boy, "I don't know the future, but I know who holds the future." Solomon is warning us yet again not to obsess about things we can't understand in this life. God's plan is good, His purpose is clear, but His program is mysterious. What I don't know about His program is balanced by what I know about Him: He is good. Just like you will trust a good friend to take care of something without your having to know all the details, so wisdom allows you to trust God. You know your friend's character—how much more trustworthy is the character of God?

Wisdom to Deal With the Pitfalls We Escape

This last point may seem slightly out of context, but it is on target as far as a power needed today, especially by men: the power to avoid illicit relationships. Wisdom will keep us from falling into the pit of immorality and preserve us from self-induced destruction.

The late pastor Ray Stedman summarized Solomon's qualifications to insert this warning in a discussion on wisdom:

"Solomon was trapped by sexual seductions. He went looking for love. Many a man or woman can echo what he is saying. He went looking for love, and thought he would find it in a relationship with a woman. He went looking for that which would support him, strengthen him and make him feel life was worth the living, but what he found was nothing but a fleeting sexual thrill. He found himself involved with a woman who did not give him what he was looking for at all; he still felt the same empty loneliness as before."

When I read Solomon's words about the perspectives and power of wisdom, I am so thankful to be a New Testament saint. For Paul wrote in Colossians 2:3 that "in [Jesus Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Thankfully we don't have to have our own wisdom. We can have the wisdom of God by having Christ. Only through Him do I gain the perspective and power of God to live life wisely.

Do you have perspective and power adequate for the life you are living? If you have Christ, you do. Gaining Him is the wisest thing you will ever do.

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

1. Read Ecclesiastes 7:11-18.

   a. Why is wisdom better than wealth?

   b. What could be the result of someone with wealth but no wisdom? Why?

   c. Why is it that, sometimes, things going wrong is actually a good thing?

   d. Do you thank God for what you have learned in the crooked places?

   e. Can we ever fully understand the works of the Lord while here on earth?

   f. Although some may find this frustrating, why is this good?

   g. Why must we remind ourselves of this when we want to feel sorry for ourselves because of all our problems?

   h. What is Solomon telling us in verse 16?

   i. If we are righteous, is it easy to develop pride about it? How can we avoid this?

2. Read Ecclesiastes 7:19-29.

   a. What does heavenly wisdom give those who have it?

   b. Do you feel you have the tendency to live in fear or concern, especially about the unknown?

   c. What reasons do we have, as Christians, not to live in fear?

   d. How does having God's wisdom encourage us not to listen to "public opinion polls"?

   e. Explain the truth that is in Solomon's words in verse 24.

GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Read Ecclesiastes 7:11-18. Discuss the three perspectives that Solomon tells us wisdom gives.

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a. Break down the two puzzles mentioned in this lesson.

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b. Why is it wise to accept the fact that we will not fully understand all the puzzles of life?

c. How does Solomon call us to live according to verse 16?

2. What four aspects of the power of wisdom does the lesson cover, based on Ecclesiastes 7:19-29? Elaborate on each and discuss how we can adopt these choices in our own lives.

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a. What does godly wisdom give us?

b. Why can we trust God, even though we do not know His plan?

c. Share stories from your own lives where you learned to trust God through the puzzles of life, and encourage others in your group to trust Him in times when we do not have all the answers.

DID YOU KNOW?

The root meaning of *wisdom* in the Old Testament is the idea of skill. That's why the Hebrew root word for *wisdom* (*hakam*) shows up in lots of places not seemingly connected to wisdom, but very much connected to skill. Garment makers (Exodus 28:3), craftsmen and designers (Exodus 35:35), shrewd people (2 Samuel 13:3), enchanters (Psalm 58:5), ants (Proverbs 30:24-28), idol makers (Isaiah 40:20), and seamen (Ezekiel 27:8) were all said to possess "wisdom," or skill. Therefore, applying *hakam* to life, wisdom becomes "the skill of living." As a craftsman fashions a piece of art, so we fashion a life of beauty and utility by the choices we make.