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The Wisdom of Jesus

BY MARK FROST

Several years ago we faced one of the church's perennial predicaments: no teacher for the junior high boys' class. When it was apparent that no one else would step forward for this hazardous duty, one of the elders, brother Coffman, agreed to take on the challenge. The first Sunday he explained to the class that they would study the one book of the Bible written just for adolescent males: Proverbs. Despite the groans of the students, he forged ahead and for the next year painstakingly led his band of seventh- and eighth-graders through the ancient book of wisdom. At promotion time, the new eighth-graders were eagerly anticipating the arrival of a new crop of seventh-graders to pick on—and a new topic for study. Then brother Coffman addressed the newly arrived seventh-graders: "Boys, these eighth-graders have spent a full year studying Proverbs. They've learned its message well. Now, for the next year, they will be teaching this wonderful book to you!"

Kevin, a young student in the class, would have become an instant Sunday school dropout if his parents would have permitted it. Instead, he opted for the next-best response: sarcasm. I can still remember him quoting the passage where the loose woman seduces the simpleton: "I have covered my bed with colored linens from Egypt. I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. Come, let's drink deep of love till morning" (Prov 7:16–18).¹ Following the quotation, spoken with feigned gravity, he would playfully break into a line from a popular Rick Springfield song: "Where can I find a woman like that?" I remember this well because, in true junior-high fashion, Kevin performed this exercise over

and over, each time amusing himself and his fellow students more than ever before.

This caused me to reflect on the audacity of the writer of Proverbs. In counseling young men not to follow the seductress, surely he realized he was describing the woman of every adolescent male's hormone-induced fantasy. Then, he dared to suggest that young men fix their fancies on an altogether different sort of woman, Lady Wisdom:

Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn out its seven pillars. She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine; she has also set her table. She has sent out her maids, and she calls from the highest point of the city. "Let all who are simple come in here!" she says to those who lack judgment. "Come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of understanding." (Prov 9:1–6)

This personification of Wisdom, which began in Proverbs, became a central feature in later Jewish wisdom literature. Roland Murphy traces the theme through the intertestamental writings of Sirach, Baruch, and the book of Wisdom.² In these writings there developed a standardized form in which Lady Wisdom beckons, "Come to me, all you who are [simple, foolish, desirous of knowledge, etc.], and I will give you [knowledge, insight, discernment, etc]."

It was natural, then, for New Testament writers to draw on this imagery. To demonstrate the uniqueness and divinity of Jesus, they identified him as the ultimate per-

sonification of Wisdom. John began his Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word (*logos*), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1), knowing that Hellenistic Jews were already using the word *logos* as a synonym for Wisdom. Paul referred to Christ as “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24). Among the Gospel writers, Matthew especially presented Jesus as Wisdom Incarnate. His record of Jesus’ call follows the familiar formula from wisdom literature: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). The unified witness of the New Testament is clear: if you seek wisdom, seek Jesus. As the writer of Proverbs labored to turn the desires of hormone-crazed teens from the pursuit of the adulteress to the quest for wisdom, so the writers of the Gospels strove to turn our lusts for money, sex, and power into a passion to know Wisdom Incarnate—Jesus.

What then is the wisdom of Jesus to which we are called? In many ways there is continuity between Old Testament wisdom teaching and the words of Jesus. One prominent thread in Old Testament wisdom writings is that of reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked. This theme, prominent in Proverbs, can be seen in Jesus’ teachings. He promised his disciples that their acts of righteousness, even those done in secret, would be rewarded: “If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward” (Matt 10:42). He also promised certain punishment for evil actions, even those done in secret: “The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken” (Matt 12:35–36).

There is, however, another thread in Old Testament wisdom literature that serves as a counterbalance to teachings on reward and punishment. Seen most clearly in Ecclesiastes and Job, this theme proclaims that life is often unfair and doesn’t make sense: “The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all” (Eccl 9:11). Again, we find parallels in the teachings of Jesus. When asked about a man born blind, Jesus rejected the notion that the affliction was a retribution for sin (John 9:3). Told of an atrocity committed by Pilate, Jesus emphasized that the misfortune did not befall the victims because they were worse sinners than others in Jerusalem (Luke 13:1–3).

While the wisdom of Jesus can be seen as continuing along the lines of Old Testament wisdom thinking, it goes

well beyond the familiar categories, often turning them inside out. His wisdom is oxymoronic—full of apparent contradictions that somehow coexist and complement each other. In fact, when Jesus presented himself as Wisdom Incarnate, he defined himself with a startling contradiction in terms: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt 11:29). Any farmer in Jesus’ day would have known that a yoke was placed on an animal for work; it was removed to give the animal rest. Shouldering a yoke with the expectation of receiving rest was nonsensical.

Where can one see this oxymoronic wisdom of Jesus? Jesus told the story of the landowner who hired workers at various times during the day but paid them all the same wage at day’s end (Matt 20:1–16). At first this parable seems to restate the traditional wisdom theme that life is not always fair. But Jesus was proclaiming a new and puzzling reality: in the kingdom of God, life is better than fair! Reward in the kingdom is not a matter of demanding one’s due; it is, rather, a matter of accepting the undeserved grace of God.

To see how Jesus’ wisdom turns conventional wisdom inside out, one need only compare the Old Testament story of Job with Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son. Job was righteous but received loss, pain, grief, and misery while his friends tried to convince him that he deserved it. The prodigal son was rebellious and wicked but received a robe, a ring, sandals, and a party while his older brother loudly protested that he didn’t deserve it. The wisdom of Jesus proclaims that life in the kingdom often doesn’t make sense; instead, it is filled with the mind-blowing, unbelievable grace that would throw a party for a sinful son fresh from the pigsty.

The ultimate example of conventional wisdom turned topsy-turvy is the death of Christ. To human wisdom, the man on the cross was a powerless fool. But the eye of faith sees in the cross “Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24).

The wisdom of the Jewish sages and the strange, oxymoronic sagacity of Jesus—Wisdom Incarnate—work amazing wonders in the lives of believers. My friend Kevin, whose antics made me question the advisability of teaching Proverbs to seventh-graders, is Exhibit A. A handsome, outgoing young man, he made it through four years of high school, four more years at a major state university, and three years of law school with his virginity intact. Evidently, Proverbs’ admonitions concerning loose women hit their mark in Kevin’s heart. He even had a routine: on his third date with a woman, he would pointedly explain his commitment to remain a virgin until his

wedding night, knowing full well that it might spell the end of the relationship.

On his third date with a girl named Amy, Kevin had “the sex talk,” as he called it. Amy dissolved into tears. She cried because she had long before stopped believing that men like Kevin existed. Yet here was a man willing to wait for a special person with whom he could share a very intimate bond: in short, the kind of man to whom she longed to commit her life. But her tears were more than tokens of surprise and awe. She heaved sobs of regret, for she knew that when she told Kevin of her impure past, he would be finished with her. A man who had saved himself for a special woman deserved just that—a pure woman who had saved herself just for him. Amy told Kevin her shameful story and waited for the rejection that was sure to follow. Then Kevin did the unexpected: holding her close as she wept, he spoke words of understanding, acceptance, and respect. He gently told her that her future did not have to be determined by her past, that he could accept her past because of his faith in God’s future.

A few weeks later, I listened as Amy named Jesus as her Lord, then I baptized her into his death, burial, and resurrection. Months later, I officiated as Amy and Kevin took their vows as husband and wife. And I marveled at God’s wisdom: the wisdom of Proverbs that caused a young man to maintain an amazing commitment to moral purity, and the wisdom of Jesus that gave him eyes to see the purity of his bride—a purity bestowed on her by the mind-blowing grace of God through his unfathomable Wisdom.

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Notes

¹ Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

² Roland Murphy, *The Tree of Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 133–49.