

HOW BIBLICAL WISDOM LEADS TO FLOURISHING

Proverbs 3:13–26 • Char Brodersen

Introduction: Good morning, Church! If it's your first time joining us, welcome! As many of you know we're spending this year building out our biblical theology—seeing how the whole story of Scripture fits together and finds its fulfillment and goal in and through Jesus Christ. This morning we're continuing in what is commonly called the Wisdom Literature.

The Wisdom literature includes Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Solomon's Song of Songs. Biblical Wisdom literature is different than the rest of scripture in that it engages with some of the great questions and difficulties that humans face in this life and how we live in the grey, head on. It often answers our questions with deeper heart probing questions by considering universal truths from human lives and the world around us. It offers language and companions for our journey through both the difficulties and joys of life. Ultimately biblical wisdom literature is concerned with how to live well, even flourish, in a world that is broken, unjust, and feels chaotic and haphazard.

What we want to consider this morning is **how biblical wisdom leads to the good life, to human flourishing.**

This is a question that people have asked since the dawn of time—what is the good life and how do I obtain it? This is an important question because it's fairly easy to live your life (and many in our time are doing that) by simply living. Maybe they are successful (according to one or another narrative), they are progressive; they seem to be going somewhere, and very quickly. But the question is not how do we live, but how do we live a life of quality, a life of goodness, a life of flourishing? Put another way, a life that regardless of what is thrown at us we are able to look over our lives with a sense of contentment, joy, purpose, and meaning?

It might be surprising for some to know that this is the main question or storyline of the Bible. It concerns how to live well, or how to flourish—the Blessed Life. The idea of Biblical wisdom only being these four or five books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon is actually a new idea. The Jews considered the whole Hebrew Bible to be wisdom literature:

“Oh, how I love your law (Torah)! I meditate on it all day long. Your commands are always with me and make me wiser than my enemies. I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts. I have kept my feet from every evil path so that I might obey your word. I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me. How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! I gain understanding from your precepts, therefore I hate every wrong path.” Psalm 119:97–104

When we think of Biblical wisdom we can relegate it to mean "spiritual wisdom" as opposed to practical wisdom; concerned with the soul and not the body, church and not business, catechism and not education, worship and not work and play. But nothing could be further from the truth. Solomon was the great King of Israel who asked God for wisdom to rule his people well, and God granted that to him and he was wise, not just as a king or a spiritual leader, but in every sphere of life.

It says in 1 Kings 4:32–33 ***“He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.”***

Solomon was a thriving Human Being!! A Flourishing One! You see, Biblical wisdom pertains to every aspect of life in this world, because it is YHWH who formed the world in Wisdom.

“The canonical scriptures are a veritable book of life, showing us God in relation to the most dramatic human crises (births, sicknesses, deaths, loves, losses, wars, falls, risks, disasters, failures, victories), the most elemental human emotions (joy, grief, love, hate, hope, fear, pain, anger, shame, awe) and the most basic human relationships (to parents, spouses, children, friends, neighbors, civil authorities, enemies, fellow-believers).” – J.I. Packer, *God has Spoken*

The purpose of this book, the Bible, is to train us in wisdom, understanding, and knowledge so that we will become wise ones, and reach our full human potential through the redemption that is offered us in Jesus Christ. And to be ones who rule well over God’s creation as those whose lives exhibit the flourishing life of God.

Paul said to Timothy; ***“From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”*** – 2 Timothy 3:15

*The purpose of the scriptures is to teach us and to train us so that we can live Godly lives and fulfill the covenant partnership that God created us for, which was lost at the Fall, but redeemed and brought back on track through Jesus Christ, in order that the earth might be filled with God’s glory.

God wants flourishing for humanity; he created us for it. Where wisdom comes in is in how we accomplish that; what road we take and who’s wisdom we use. The fear of the Lord or the self determination of the tree of the knowledge—both good and bad.

So, let’s talk about how biblical wisdom leads to the good life.

I. In the beginning ... wisdom.

- A. The first pages of the Bible vividly paint this picture - that YHWH’s wisdom leads to flourishing.
- B. ***“By wisdom the Lord laid the earth’s foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place; by his knowledge the watery depths were divided, and the clouds let drop the dew.”*** Proverbs 3:19–20
- C. Think about the vastness of God’s creation—the majesty of it, its intricacy in how everything works together to bring order and life.
- D. Scripture says that it is by God’s infinite wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and power that he forms the universe and makes a world teeming with life. He creates a flourishing garden to be the habitat for his image bearers.

We know the story. In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth he placed the first humans in the Garden of Eden. In it there is peace and this picture of flourishing. Mankind is in harmony with God. Mankind is in harmony with one another—naked and unashamed. Mankind is in harmony with the rest of the creation. Here we have a picture a snapshot of the Good life. Another word that the scripture uses for this is Shalom Peace. Humans in right relationship with God, one another, and creation. Without shame, without fear, without guilt. Building God’s world into something more with him and one another.

The man and the woman are under the apprenticeship of YHWH, through his wisdom, understanding, and knowledge they are to have dominion (rule) over the land and the animals, to fill the earth and bring into into submission, to spread out the borders of the Garden so that the whole earth becomes the flourishing garden temple dwelling for God and humanity.

This is humanity’s commission to fill the earth with God’s goodness and blessing, with his reign and rule; to cause it to flourish and yet they have another option. There are two trees in the midst of the garden: the Tree of Life AND the Tree of Knowledge—both good and bad. What will humans choose? Will they do what YHWH has called them to; will they take of the tree of life; will they come to YHWH for wisdom, understanding, and knowledge in how to fulfill this commission. Or will they strike out on their own and seek knowledge, maturity,

meaning, purpose, and right and wrong apart from God, apart from his authority? Will they choose to listen and obey the voice of God, seeing all that he has done for them or will they try and have the kingdom without the king?

Now here is a super interesting note that we often miss: a serpent comes along and speaks to the woman, Eve. The Serpent is described as "*arum*"—sly, crafty, and prudent (This is a different sort of wisdom). The "*arum*" (crafty) serpent invites humanity to question the ordering of the world, to defy God's ordering, and to find out knowledge for themselves. He offers and suggest wisdom apart from God. He offers a different version of the Good life, to take of the tree of knowledge, both good and bad, to be autonomous, to choose to rule themselves. There is even a flattering invitation: the ability to be "like God." Humanity is led astray by the words of the serpent, and reaches for wisdom apart from God: the ability to order the world as they see fit.

Yet, humanity's grasp for wisdom reveals itself as foolish: its results are not life and flourishing and the good ordering of God's creation. Instead it leads to death, toil in work and home, broken relationship with God and others, and finally the loss of their garden home.

The rest of the Old Testament shows the continuing foolish decisions of humanity as they move further away from Eden and the good life contained there. God remains faithful to his purpose for mankind to flourish under his care and promises that one day One will come who will crush the serpent and bring humanity to the garden dwelling of God.

From this point on the narrative tension of the Old Testament is set: ***how will we get back to the garden and the good life?***

The Beginning of Wisdom—Enter the Wisdom Literature

- E. "The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth— Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction." (1:1–7)
- F. ***"By wisdom the Lord laid the earth's foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place; by his knowledge the watery depths were divided, and the clouds let drop the dew."*** Proverbs 3:1
- G. Proverbs is often seen as a compilation of helpful pithy statements for living in a wise way. Although these are in the book, this view misses out on the larger role that Proverbs plays in the Bible. Giving answer to the question: How can we get back to the Garden? How can we experience the good life of flourishing?
- H. As seen in the introduction of Proverbs, the book is for the sake of knowing wisdom. In the Bible, wisdom is less concerned with intellect or simply judgement, rather wisdom refers more to skill and applied knowledge of living in the world. Wisdom throughout Proverbs is regularly paralleled with understanding, instruction, insight, prudence, knowledge, etc.

Worth noting is Proverbs' repeated use of the words wisdom, understanding, and knowledge together and depicted as "tools" of creation within the larger canon of the Old Testament.

1. According to Proverbs 3:19–20 it is by wisdom, understanding, and knowledge that God built the Land, The Garden of Eden.
2. According to Exodus 31:3; 35:30–31 it is by wisdom, understanding, and knowledge given by the Spirit of YHWH that Bezalel builds the Tabernacle, The Garden Tent of God.
3. According to 1 Kings 7:13–14 Hiram is full of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge to build YHWH's

Temple in Jerusalem. Again, a throwback to the Garden-in imagery and YHWH's dwelling place.

Here's the piece that brings it all together: "by wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures." Proverbs 24:3-4.

By wisdom, understanding, and knowledge you can build your home and your life filled with rare beauty and treasures.

1. Like Bezalel and Hiram with the Tabernacle/Temple "replacement gardens," God invites you to trust or fear him and build your home, or life, with wisdom. So, wisdom is depicted as the tools to build a good life.

2. The Genesis 1-2 Proverbs connection and ideal is this: YHWH, the Great Gardener and Architect of life, can train you in wisdom, understanding, and knowledge so that your own personal life will be a kind of mini garden, and Eden, of flourishing and fulness.

This is what Psalm 1 is talking about. The one who delights in and meditates on Torah-God's wisdom, understanding, and knowledge-day and night-will be like a flourishing tree planted by the rivers of water. This is the Edenic vision!

Ultimately this offer to learn YHWH's wisdom that leads to flourishing is realized in Jesus Christ.

Pastor and author, Wesley Hill, wrote this, "***Woven into the fabric of Christian theology is the insistence that Jesus Christ is the truest, most perfect, most glorious (and happiest) human being who has ever lived—and that those who want to experience true, full, rich humanness must become like him, must pattern their lives after Jesus' humanity.***"

Jesus offers to teach us this way of wisdom this flourishing life, through his own example, and his teaching. We see this in the sermon on the mount: flourishing are the ...

The question is will we fear the Lord? Will we live in awe and wonder at his goodness, provision, and care for us and respond in gratitude (as Adam and Eve failed to do)? Will we believe that he is our Father who loves us and wants flourishing for our lives? Will we measure God's love and faithfulness by our circumstance or by the cross? Will we seek wisdom, understanding, and knowledge that comes from him, or will we strike out on our own?

The Two Trees

What the Book of Proverbs and the Wisdom literature in general is doing is taking us right back to the Garden; putting us in Eve's shoes as it were. It's as if we ourselves, each day, are standing before the two trees—the Tree of Life—dependence on God, obedience to God, faith and trust in God, that he loves us, created us, knows what is best and will bring true flourishing. OR the Tree of Knowledge—both good and bad, self-governance, determination, autonomy, and freedom.

Many think the Bible is all about God controlling us, but this is such a warped view. God wasn't keeping Adam and Eve from knowledge and the good life, he was preserving them for it. God wants us to grow in wisdom so that it becomes a true part of us in order that we can be the covenant image partners that he has created us to be. God wants us to become fully human under his apprenticeship. He wants to make us truly wise, to rule on his behalf and make the world a garden.

Let me just say ... **this takes a life time of cultivation. It is not instant gratification. It doesn't come through a one time read through scripture (Psalm 1)**

rust in the slow work of God. And I say this because I know that many Christians treat scripture the way we treat the latest app, diet, workout, self-help book, etc.

Many in our culture want a kind of app or plug and play wisdom for life; read this book, listen to this podcast, Marie Kondo your life and POOF, the good life—you've arrived. But wisdom and the good life is not a commodity that you pick up and plug in. It is cultivated character according to one way of wisdom or another—the wisdom you choose to cultivate either leads to flourishing or to decay and death.

It is interesting to me that the wisdom that the Serpent offered was instantaneous, you could circumvent the difficult road of discipleship and apprenticeship, and arrive immediately; “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.”

Church, we search for apps, books, podcast, and this or that to change our lives. Spiritual experiences through musical worship or second baptisms, but when it comes to following Jesus and experiencing the full and flourishing life there are no silver bullets—we must be his apprentices, his disciples over a lifetime. These modern divinations, these secret, esoteric, allusive offers of wisdom, will not and cannot deliver on their promises of the good life. And what happens each time is a kind of death as your eyes are opened, the heart ache and disappointment, disillusionment sets in and the good life once again evades you. The tragedy of all tragedies is that all day long - the Holy Spirit cries out (Wisdom cries aloud Proverbs 8:1-3) — and is offering to us a cultivation of the wisdom, understanding and knowledge of YHWH as disciples of Jesus that does in fact lead to the good life - that leads to flourishing.

Will you take him at his word? Will you come under his apprenticeship? Will you begin to cultivate this flourishing life that he created and redeemed you for?

Here is the last thing that I'll say. As I said in the beginning the good life is something that humanity has been searching for since the dawn of time. People are tirelessly going after wisdom that is not wisdom, paths and philosophies that cannot deliver on the good life. We the church have the wisdom, understanding, and knowledge that leads to flourishing and the good life.

Every human being on earth was created by God and for God and when we display his character and his kingdom it is effectual and it has impact. People feel the tugging of their hearts toward God and either move toward him or away from him. We, Jesus' people, have the thing that every human being longs for—true flourishing. The flourishing life of the Christian is the greatest witness to the watching world. When we live by God's wisdom it displays the flourishing that all of humanity is looking for. I cannot tell you how many times I have talked with people at coffee shops, restaurants, parks, or the grocery store and that see something in me and our family by the way they live that attracts them. It's not me, it's not us, it's the flourishing life of God that they see.

Will we hide that from the world, by neglecting to become who we've been called to be? Will we fail to enter that flourishing ourselves by taking from the tree of self determination and independence rather than the tree of life?

Communion

As we come to the table this morning, this is the offer on hand:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 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. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." - Matthew 11:28–30.

How is the Spirit inviting you to respond to Jesus' offer today?

Prayer

Great Gardener, you offer to train us in your wisdom, understanding, and knowledge so that our lives will be these mini gardens, these microcosms of Eden, of flourishing and fulness.

Lord, we have rebelled and failed again and again to believe you, to obey you. Rather we have sown unfaithfulness, unrighteousness, and injustice. We have tried to forge our own paths to the good life, and we have tried to build Eden with worldly wisdom and virtues.

Forgive us O LORD and restore us again. Bring us back to your wisdom, under your discipleship. May your words be cherished by us, practiced by us, and lived out in our lives so that we might be what you created, and purchased us by your blood to be; a new and flourishing humanity in covenant partnership with you.

In the Name of Jesus our Savior and King we pray.

Amen.