

# 4 : Songs of Wisdom

There is a similarity between 'wisdom psalms' and the Book of Proverbs in the advice and thought that they offer and reflect upon. One feature of wisdom literature is that it makes use of contrasts. Within the Book of Psalms, we find writers concerned primarily with conduct (walk this way, not that), and the contradictions of life (such as 'why do we bother when bad people seem to get away with their behaviour').

It is therefore unsurprising that Jesus, who grew up studying the Scriptures, used a similar technique in his teaching ('For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.' Matthew 7:13,14).

As to a definition of wisdom, we have the story of Solomon, known as someone who asked God for this very gift. Scripture tells us that 'God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore' (1 Kings 4:29). Solomon asked for 'a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?' and God granted him 'a wise and discerning heart.'



French Psalter, Getty-Museum, David in Prayer, c1200

## Read Psalm 1

*'Blessed is the one*

*who does not walk in step with the wicked  
or stand in the way that sinners take  
or sit in the company of mockers,  
2but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and who meditates on his law, day and night.'* (vs. 1,2)

In this relatively short psalm, we find the righteous (verses 1-3) contrasted with the wicked (verses 4-5) followed by a one verse summary of how God's love and justice will ultimately be seen.

The righteous, who have made a conscious decision not to walk in step with the way of the wicked, will find blessing, be at peace and live fruitful lives, as if they were trees planted by streams of water. Their desire and delight come in knowing, studying, and doing God's will. And studying meant memorising, because of course most people did not have access to the written Word of God.

Not so the wicked who, unlike fruitful trees, find themselves compared to the chaff from threshed corn blowing away in the wind.

The position of this psalm at the beginning of the psalter may well be to persuade the reader to make the right choice in the path they follow and live a life in obedience to the will of the LORD.

These are the readers who will find their own voice in the psalms and within them find testimony that relates to their own lives. Not a promise in terms of wealth, but in knowledge of the faithful care and companionship of God.

## Discussion

Q) The wisdom shared is that time is best spent in focussing on God's law. There is a complaint of some Christians being 'so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly use'. Where does the balance lie between study and mission?

Q) Verse 1 talks of not sitting in the company of mockers. How easy is to do just that when we come across someone doing something we might consider wrong, trivial, or to us useless?

Q) From your experience of the Psalms so far, does this one indeed provide new readers with a good entry point?

## Read Psalm 14

*'The LORD looks down from heaven  
on all mankind*

*to see if there are any who understand,  
any who seek God. (v 2)*

The psalmist here contrasts the words and lives of the 'fools' with that of the 'wise'. Here, the fools are not ignorant or indeed atheist, but those who see no need of God and whose lives are morally deficient (the Hebrew word translated 'fool') or corrupt. He characterises the fool as someone showing disregard for God and a lack of concern or love for others. This has manifested itself in the abuse and mistreatment of God's people.

It is difficult to understand the true context of this psalm. Maybe the ruling classes were exploiting the poor, or this is a picture of the nation of Israel suffering in a hostile world. God looks down and sees this happening, but what really overwhelms him is a general lack of faith.

# SAMPLE

This was a universal observation at those times, and in an ancient Babylonian prayer for forgiveness (c1800 BC), the penitent asks: 'Who is there who is guilty of no sin against his god? ... All human beings ... harbour sin.'

It is the vulnerable, the poor and the people of God who have become easy prey to these evildoers, but God's love and justice will prevail. Their plans to destroy the people of God will fail because God is their refuge, and the last verse talks of restoration, and a call to worship.

As in other wisdom literature, the message is to hold fast, do not join the company of fools, but the fellowship of believers. Show wisdom in your choice, seek the LORD, and take refuge in him.

## Discussion

Q) From your own experience, why does belief in God seem a non-starter for some people?

Q) If God is looking down (v 14) and wondering where the believers are, what hope is there for those who have no faith. Is the Church visible and relevant enough for today's world?

Q) Make the right choice is the message. How easy has that been for you?

## Read Psalm 37:1-11,39-40

*'Trust in the LORD and do good;  
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.  
Take delight in the LORD,  
and he will give you the desires of your heart.'* (vs. 3,4)

This psalm is worth reading in its entirety, but for this study we are looking at the beginning and end of what is a classic wisdom poem, written with an alphabetical structure in the original Hebrew, with the psalmist assuming the role of a teacher imparting wisdom to his readers. It is a response to the problem of evil, which the Old Testament often expresses itself as a question, 'Why do the wicked prosper and the good suffer?'. The preacher Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) calls it 'the great riddle of the prosperity of the wicked and the affliction of the righteous.'

The thrust of the psalm's message is around how the righteous should react when seeing the wicked prosper around them. Rather than be downhearted, the psalmist encourages them to trust in God, who is their security and blessing, because the wicked will eventually wither away.

Only the righteous will inherit the land and enjoy peace, prosperity (v 11), and find their heartfelt prayers answered. Jesus refers to verse 11 in his Beatitudes, 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth' (Matthew 5:5).

We should not compare word 'meek' with 'weak', for in the Bible it refers to humility seen in some of the Bible's great figures such as Moses, described in Numbers 12:3 as a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth'.

If the idea of raising humility above strength and power seems counter-intuitive, then remember that this was also the teaching of Jesus, who was happy to associate with those thought to be outcasts from society.

The meek find blessing because they trust God to meet their needs, rather than resorting to exploitation and violence. Their confidence and strength come from God alone, who will not forget their willingness to live lives this way.



Psalm 37, Psalter in Musée Condé, Chantilly

### Discussion

Q) So, do you have an answer for the 'great riddle' mentioned above?

Q) What should our attitude be both to those who seek to exploit 'the system' to get richer, and those who seem to be failed by the same system, remaining poor and in need?

Q) Meek is not a word much used today to complement someone. Is there a better word or phrase we could use?

## Read Psalm 111

*'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;  
all who follow his precepts have good understanding.  
To him belongs eternal praise.'* (v10)

Another acrostic poem, each half-line beginning with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It recalls the Exodus and wilderness wanderings before the people of God entered the Promised Land, but this is not an occasion for pride, rather for praise.

This is a hymn of praise to the LORD, with the last line adding 'To him belongs eternal praise', and its theme develops through subsequent verses until in the final verse the word we are told, 'the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom' and it is through knowledge of God's power, works, love and grace that praise becomes a natural expression of faith in daily lives.

Psalms 111 and 112 are similar in style, probably composed by the same author and intended to be used together.

# SAMPLE

So, what does it mean to 'fear the Lord' if this is indeed the beginning of wisdom (seen also in Proverbs 9:10)? The writer Philipp Melancthon, who worked with Martin Luther, contrasted the fear that a prisoner has for his jailer or executioner, with that of the 'filial' fear of a child to its parents, which is about love and respect, and not wanting to offend the one they love and trust.

Awe is a natural response once we begin to understand not only something of the majesty, power, and holiness of God, but also a love that reaches out to individual hearts and lives.

## Discussion

- Q) What does the use of poetic form tell you about the writer?
- Q) How easy it is to be positive in your prayers, as the psalmist encourages, when life is tough?
- Q) What does verse 10 say to your heart?

## For further thought:

Have a go at writing your own wisdom psalm