

HOW MUCH BETTER TO GET WISDOM THAN GOLD! (PROVERBS 16:16)

BY GRAHAM ARCHER

IS IT JUST ME?

Over many years of public ministry, I have discovered about twenty 'go to' verses that have become part of my inner liturgy. Friends that stand strong around me like my own personal Stonehenge. Solid and practical texts that have stood the test of time and create for me a safe space to function, guarded by immovable truth. One of these is James 1:5, 'If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.'

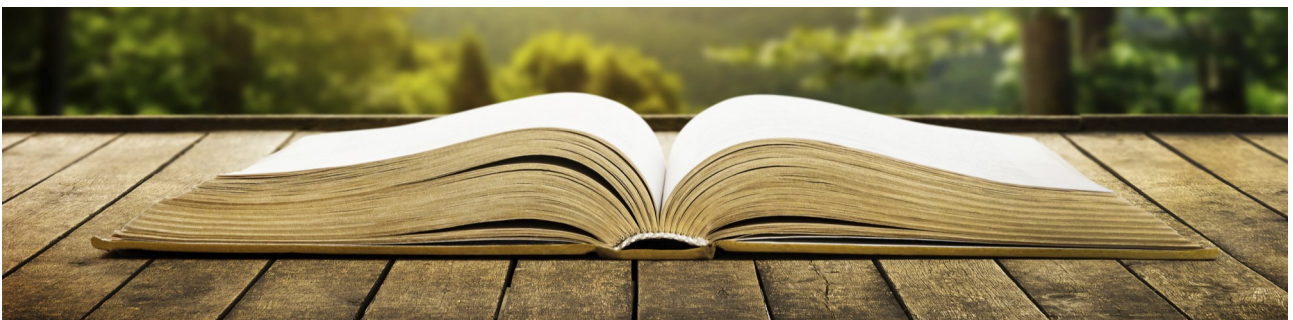
When a PCC meeting spins into negativity, a pastoral visit takes me outside my comfort zone, an email raises knotty issues or a sermon plan is not coming together, off my mind goes to that steady rock of Christian truth; 'if any of you lack wisdom...' reminding me yet again to ask.

The reason I have enjoyed reading R.T. Kendall In Pursuit of His Wisdom is that he takes my well-worn verse and invites me to see that it has a much wider reach than I have allowed it before, so I am indebted to him in the reflections that follow.

MORE THAN BEING CLEVER

Biblical wisdom is far greater than a much needed insight or morsel of information personally delivered to a moment of crisis. It is a lifetime pursuit, a stream of inner resourcefulness and the product of a life spent open to the mind of God. One dictionary defines wisdom as 'the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgement'; R.T. Kendall defines it as 'getting God's opinion'. So where does it come from?

Proverbs 9 and Job 28 agree that 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The consequence of going with foolishness is so bad that we are right to run in the opposite direction. For those of us who are brave enough to take on Christian leadership, we soon discover people follow not only what we say, but also how we live, and it is a fearful thing to lead people astray by unwise example. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, he demonstrated extraordinary wisdom and obedience because he saw the consequences of the opposite – the fear of foolish decisions is juxtaposition to the delight of wise ones.



Nowhere in the Bible is the suggestion that anything else is the beginning of wisdom. Breeding, education, privilege, IQ and genetics are neither alternative qualifications for wisdom or sources of exclusion – in fact, some of the wisest people are not highly educated and I think that is because they know that unless God gives them wisdom they are sunk. When 1 Corinthians 1 asks ‘Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?’ Paul isn’t talking about a kingdom that is perversely upside down for the sake of it. He is reminding the hearer that the most foundational wisdom in all creation, namely the cross and its effect, is accessible by all, and possibly most clearly seen in those who are least qualified:

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they wondered; and they recognized that they had been with Jesus. (Acts 4:13)

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

One reason is because it has a high priority in the Scriptures. When Solomon was given the option of any reward, his request was ‘give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong’ (1 Kings 3). Consider Moses’ prayer ‘if you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so that I may know you and continue to find favour with you’ (Exodus 33). These requests are not for one off titbits of inspiration but for a growing inner core of wisdom and insight. How about Proverbs’ perspective on the topic? ‘The beginning of wisdom is this: get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding’ (Proverbs 4:7).

The second reason is because it is a vital resource for 21st century Christians. True wisdom is in essence God, and the primary pathway to it is faithful reflection in the presence of the Holy Spirit. I remember a visiting lecturer to my theological college provoking us to pray with a copy of the Bible in one hand and the Daily Mirror in the other! (At the time I thought clergy were supposed to read the Times or the Guardian to show how clever they are, but I digress.) The main take-home message for me however was that Christian leaders need to be more than just informed/knowledgeable/streetwise. The real challenge is to become leaders who can move from knowledge to insight/understanding/wisdom. Interpreting the events of the day through a theological lens

and the words of Scripture for daily life.

The past three decades have seen a phenomenal increase in communication leading to a staggering level of access to information. Sales of encyclopaedias have plummeted while online information portals have accelerated and the easy accessibility of smartphones means that we can search information from almost anywhere. Wisdom is not the same as knowledge, but we might be forgiven for thinking that knowledge is king in the light of these paradigm shifts in technology.

Wisdom is king, but only the King is truly wise. Knowing what to say or do in a given situation, how to be or when to hold back. Understanding consequences, realising potential, discerning the best in a range of good options and offering an insightful word at just the right time. These are the territories of wisdom.

TO CONCLUDE: A WORKED EXAMPLE

When the storm blew up in Acts 27 and threatened the ship on which Paul was being taken as prisoner to Rome he had the opportunity to demonstrate great leadership. Though not a mariner by background he was a follower of Christ with access to wisdom. In verses 22-26 he called them to courage, and described how he believed things would unfold and the need to prepare for shipwreck. In verses 31-32 he warned the centurion that sailors who tried to take to the lifeboats would not survive, so they ditched the lifeboats. In verses 33-34 he urged them to eat in preparation for the next stage and then ditch excess supplies. As events unfolded, Paul became more and more trusted and then more and more valuable. All the way through, acknowledging that wisdom had come from God.

I’m glad to be alive at a time where there is access to knowledge; but Lord, make me wise.

Amen.

THE FEAR OF THE LORD IS THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM.
PROVERBS 9:10



FOR REFLECTION

1. What does your current reading and praying illustrate about your desire to be wise?
2. Who currently inspires you as a fine example of wise leadership and what can you learn from them? How could you find more time to read or listen to them?
3. How does your own assessment of your natural intelligence influence your dependency on God?
4. If you could have greater insight into one more area of life, what would it be? How about starting to pray about that now?