

X marks the spot

5. Wisdom calling

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BEING A treasure hunter is an entirely optional pursuit. It is usually done only by metal-detecting enthusiasts. But is Scriptural treasure-hunting optional? How is it presented to us in Scripture itself?

“Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding” (Prov. 4:7).*

‘Principal’ means ‘first’, that is, the most important. And:

“Happy is the man who finds wisdom . . . She is more precious than rubies, and all the things you may desire cannot compare with her” (3:13-15).

Then, in contrast, we learn of the person who does not pursue the treasures of wisdom:

“How long, you simple ones, will you love simplicity? For scorners delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge . . . Because I [wisdom] have called and you refused . . . because you disdained all my counsel . . . I also will laugh at your calamity . . . For the turning away of the simple will slay them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them” (1:22-32).

On the one hand, gaining the treasures of wisdom is the principal (primary, first) thing we should address in our lives. And, on the other, neglecting to search for it will lead us to disaster. Notice the language that is used: “scorners”; “hate knowledge”; “disdained all my counsel”; “complacency”. That is simply describing inaction!

Now lets put this into a real-life context. How important is it to search the Bible—really?

The tangible dangers of inaction

Did you know that in the law of most countries it is just as much an offence *not* to do certain things as it is to *do* certain things? So, for example, you can be fined for not wearing a seat belt, or not reporting a crime. You may even go to jail for ‘aiding and abetting’ if you are party to criminal behaviour and do not report it. You are an

accessory to that crime. And so it goes with the Bible. Neglecting to search for Bible treasure will damage us severely. How so?

In Proverbs the primary reasons why wisdom is so vital are made plain in the first chapters. These can be grouped into five categories. The first two are rather surprising, as they are negative, not positive like the others:

- 1 wisdom delivers you from an evil and miserable lifestyle gained from following the wrong company with the promise of wealth (2:10-15; 1:10-19)
- 2 it lets you recognise the character of the woman who will do you harm, and gives help escaping from her grasp (2:16-19)

These two reappear constantly throughout Proverbs and the rest of the Bible. They can be seen to be the main reasons for the deterioration and inevitable collapse of society—in other words, bad money and illicit relationships. Wisdom promises to keep us from falling foul of either of them throughout our lives, and equips us to rescue others from bad choices too.

What’s it all for?

We need to be careful as a community that we do not entirely lose the reasons why we study the Bible. Some might study it for prophecy and academic interest. Others might study it only to be encouraged by it, reading Psalms and their favourite New Testament passages. Some might use it for instruction in baptism, then leave it largely alone. Others might incessantly study the ‘first principles’ throughout their lives. Still others might use the Word of God as arrows and slingstones against those in doctrinal error. Whilst all these things are part of what we can legitimately use the Bible for, they are all peripheral. We are ‘majoring in minor things’ or having a meal of hors d’oeuvres or puddings. Why would you buy

* All quotations from the NKJV.

a car just to sit in it on your driveway, listening to the new stereo?

Once we have knowledge of the gospel, the primary application of the Word of God is to give wisdom. And what this amounts to in practice is to stop us marrying an adulterous wife or husband, keep us from illicit relationships, and save us from the heartache of chasing after money and all the evils that brings. It is there to safeguard our family unit while all families around us break apart. It shows us how to bring up children unaffected by this evil world. It shows us what career to pursue, and what job offers it is best to turn down. It will keep us from the wrong friends, the ones who will take us on paths of self-destruction. In short, it will give us the framework within which to live a happy, God-centred life.

The rewards of diligence

Once the Bible has furnished us with the gospel, and safeguarded us from those decisions we make which could have dreadful repercussions throughout our adult lives, then daily interaction with the Word will start to bring the more positive hidden treasures:

- understanding and walking in justice, judgement, equity, prudence and discretion; in other words, being able to represent yourself in the best light and be a benefit to others (1:2-4; 3:4)
- a life of peace, as opposed to everyday strife gained from wrong choices, particularly the ones in points 1 and 2 (3:2,17,18,24-26)
- blessings direct from God for obedience, including long life, protection, riches, glory and honour, health and unhindered work (1:33; 2:7-9; 3:2,8,10,18,22-26,33,35; 4:8-13)

So we can see that Bible treasure, once we start to find it, will give us a *whole life experience* this side of the Kingdom. Bible wisdom is there to make us happy (Prov. 3:13)!

Worked example: are you going round in circles?

Well, that's quite a long introduction to the final worked example we are going to take in this series of articles. In this example we will see how the Apostle Paul used the Bible, not as a dessert recipe, but to prepare the main course. Paul tackled issues of sex, marriage, friendships, money and ultimately happiness, from seemingly irrelevant Old Testament passages. He derived happiness-giving life principles from his treasure hunting. And we can see how he did it.

But before we go on, the answer to a question posed earlier. Why do we tend to go for the hors d'oeuvres and not the main course? The answer is, because it is easier to swallow. We do not want to meditate on the Word. We want just to swallow it down without chewing. We skim read. We are looking at a field from beside the fence, and we convince ourselves that we are eagerly looking for treasure. Paul did not do this. He chewed. He leapt over the fence, ran into the field and dug. He skipped the entrée and filled up on the main course. Here's how it might have happened:

One day Paul had his Bible in his hands. He had set aside half an hour to read it. He read Deuteronomy 22, a passage he had read many times from his youth. He had read it along with other classmates in rabbinical school. He had read it with Pharisee text books and commentaries. He had debated it with priests and Levites. He had judged people on its contents, thinking he knew what it said. But today he read a small portion and when he was finished he closed the book and put it down beside his chair.

This was not easy for him. Five minutes of reading seemed far too little. It broke the habits of a lifetime. But he was a changed man since his conversion, and had learned a better way. This new strategy of reading the Word had occurred to him as he pondered the clean and unclean animals, blinded by Jesus' light and unable to read. Those animals that ate and then ate some more were unclean. Those that ate, chewed, re-chewed, and then chewed some more were clean.

Paul had become a chewer. Now he had the remainder of his half hour to meditate. Leaning back on his chair he closed his eyes and allowed portions of the text to come to mind. As each clause of the Law presented itself he thought on it, looked at it, turning it around, prodding and exploring. He said a prayer in his mind: Lord, please give me understanding (Ps. 119:97,135,169).

As he walked in the field, a patch of grass appeared to him to be growing a little taller than the rest. He wandered over and prodded with his foot. The earth was softer here and slightly raised.

The passage he had been thinking about was verse 10. The donkey, he thought. Why would someone put a donkey next to an ox and yoke them together? Surely they would go round in circles! Why would God need to make a law about something no one in their right mind would do?

Paul ran and grabbed his shovel and pickaxe. Arriving back at the suspicious location he began to dig on the spot and in a radius all round it.

Reaching down for his Bible, Paul read the previous and next chapters, noting anything similarly conspicuous or possibly related to the unequal strength of the ox and the ass. Putting his Bible down again he closed his eyes as the answers began to resolve themselves.

Paul remembered the passage he had read the day before, a law about taking a wife as spoil in war (Deut. 21:10-14). If I would not unequally yoke together an ass and an ox for fear of going round in circles, why would I, a devoted believer in the one true God, marry a woman who was brought up worshipping idols? Would that give me success in life? Or would the effect be similarly disastrous?

Later, when writing to the Corinthian ecclesia, he divulged his treasure: "Do not be unequally

yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14-18). And as a result, 2,000 years later we can still ponder the same wisdom. Will we have success in our lives if we take a partner who does not serve the God we do? The answer is our own to make, either by listening to wisdom or by experience. Either way, wisdom just wants us to be happy.

Let's resolve to read less and listen more. Let's spend more time chewing than constantly putting more food in our mouths. Let's draw near to God to learn wisdom so that it can protect us from bad paths in the future. Let's love His precepts because they can make us happy in our daily lives, while all those around us serve up their own folly of negligence.

(Concluded)