

that “Britain’s aircraft carriers may operate for a while without planes following government cuts, the Defence Secretary admitted.”

Headlines like this, along with the ongoing financial turmoil in the USA, the prospect of more quantitative easing, the need to focus on balancing the books and bad military experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, perhaps point to the reason why the Tarshish power described in Ezekiel 38 appears to have no appetite or ability for a conflict with the northern invader. The combination of straitened financial conditions and extreme reluctance to embark on overseas military campaigns may account for this.



Picture: © iStockphoto.com/Paul Mckeown

The aircraft carrier HMS Ark Royal, planned to be scrapped under UK government proposals.

Exhortation

The wisdom that is from above

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The wisdom of God as revealed in His Word is in stark contrast to the wisdom of the world in which we live. In requiring us to apply the principle of godly wisdom in our lives, our heavenly Father has provided us with examples to follow—Solomon, Abraham and the Lord Jesus Christ.

WE LIVE in a world where huge emphasis is placed on the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. From an early age it is drummed into us that we must gain knowledge, so we can be successful at school, so we can be successful at university, so we can get a great job, so we can gain great wealth—the list goes on. The world’s estimation is that knowledge equals success and a fulfilled life. There is nothing inherently wrong in gaining knowledge; the problem is that all too often the emphasis is on gaining knowledge at the expense of knowing God.

As a society, we are obsessed with the accumulation of knowledge and pushing back the

boundaries of human existence, while the media feeds us a diet of popular culture geared at benchmarking our own performance by the things we know. And yet as disciples of Christ, with our vantage point of our hope in the Lord Jesus Christ, we know this ethos is diametrically opposed to the way we are asked to live.

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge”, Proverbs tells us (1:7), advising us to “get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding” (4:7). “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart”, it adds; “and lean not unto thine own understanding” (3:5). This is not the way of the world. Worldly wisdom permeates our lives, and we find the Word of God being regarded as fable. Opportunities for worship have been replaced by leisure and social activities; issues of morality are ignored; and any encouragement to face up to our own mortality is conveniently disregarded.

Yet God is quite clear in His assessment of the wisdom of man, dismissively asking, "Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? . . . For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness" (1 Cor. 1:20; 3:19). If Scripture lays so much emphasis on obtaining this wisdom which is from above, how can we obtain it that we might apply it in our lives?

Where shall wisdom be found?

Wisdom and intelligence are different things. Intelligence is the capacity to acquire and apply knowledge, while wisdom is knowing what is true and being able to apply it. When we think of applying godly wisdom, it is Solomon who first springs to mind, and the visit of the Queen of Sheba to him gives us an insight into what the wisdom of God is all about: "And when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the LORD, she came to prove him with hard questions" (1 Kgs. 10:1).

We can only guess at what those hard questions were. 'How should one govern in justice?' 'How does one keep the land in peace and prosperity?' 'How does one deal with the enemies of the state?' But one thing is sure: she was there because the Name of the Lord was being proclaimed by this man with God's wisdom. Indeed, "all the earth sought to Solomon, to hear his wisdom, which God had put in his heart" (v. 24). Something about the way he ruled witnessed that his wisdom was like no wisdom in any other kingdom. That something was his reverence for Almighty God. Everything Solomon showed the queen proved that God was real and integral to his life. She sees the way in which he approaches the house of the Lord and worships (v. 5), and she has learnt about God's overriding purpose with Israel (v. 9).

"Blessed be the LORD thy God, Which delighted in thee, to set thee on the throne of Israel: because the LORD loved Israel for ever, therefore made He thee king, to do judgment and justice". She knows, in detail, God's purpose with Israel and the promises made to Abraham, acknowledging the establishment of Israel for ever—and, alongside these promises, we wonder just how much of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ was conveyed to her. The whole episode speaks of recognition that it is Solomon's God Who has put him in this place. Solomon himself holds up his hands and

acknowledges that all this is from God and not as a result of his own greatness.

When Solomon first sought for wisdom, he began by confessing he was "but a little child: [not knowing] how to go out or come in" (3:7) that he might judge God's people. The man who had inherited a vast and flourishing kingdom from his father admits his feelings of inadequacy before God.

Humility, then, is the precursor to wisdom. There is no boasting that the greatness of his kingdom is his own doing. Other kings did just that, of course. Nebuchadnezzar bragged, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?" (Dan. 4:30). That was the wisdom of the world, in sharp contrast with the humbleness of mind God seeks. So from the outset Solomon was already wise enough to ask for the right thing, perhaps having observed how his father David had been able to negotiate the sometimes turbulent circumstances of his reign by trusting in the wisdom of the Lord.

So God replies, "Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment; behold, I have done according to thy words" (1 Kgs. 3:11,12). And Solomon is blessed beyond measure. The Lord's view of wisdom is that it is the ability to discern judgement—to be able to decide what course we take in life, for right or for wrong, for good or for evil.

God only wise

Ultimately this wisdom is an attribute of God's own character. The psalmist explains, "Justice and judgment are the habitation of Thy throne: mercy and truth shall go before Thy face" (89:14). When God revealed Himself to Moses in the cleft of the rock, the qualities shown were largely based upon justice and judgement: "The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation" (Ex. 34:6,7).

There are justice and judgement, revealed in God's Name and character. Thus Solomon's request was to be more like his God. This was wisdom to him, and the exhortation for us is

obvious. We are asked not to set our sights on riches or length of days, but to seek an appreciation of who we really are before God and whether we are making the right decisions in life. How often do we demonstrate our belief that there is nothing of lasting value that this life can offer us?

The first use of the phrase “justice and judgment” was at the time of the punishment of Sodom, when the angels sent by God debated whether Abraham should be party to the reason for their visit: “Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do . . . ? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment” (Gen. 18:17, 19).

Abraham’s wisdom was demonstrated by making right decisions in his life. He showed righteous judgement by telling his household about God’s ways. Wisdom manifested itself in bringing up his family in the knowledge and fear of the Lord. Without doubt, the greatest gift we can give our children is teaching them of God, and if we neglect this we are acting most foolishly. Solomon confirms it: “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6). In His judgements on Sodom, even the Lord makes provision for a single family in the whole city, and so confident of His justice is Abraham that he can fall back on the words, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25).

Early on in his life, seeking justice and judgement evidently dominated Solomon’s thinking. His proverbs are littered with instruction for acquiring wisdom, and its importance to him is set out in the form of a father’s guidance for his son: “The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel; to know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding; to receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity . . . The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge . . . My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother” (Prov. 1:1-3,7,8).

Just like Abraham, Solomon’s priority is to pass on wisdom to his offspring so that they too might walk with complete respect for the Lord. Whatever difficulty we encounter in life, Solomon is telling us, in whatever dilemma we find ourselves, if we follow instruction from our God and display His values and attributes, then there is nothing we need fear. It is wisdom if we do this, and there is no need for a vast intellect to understand these things—anyone can do it. The

beauty of wisdom in the Lord is that it is accessible to every type of person, and not merely the privilege of those with a great IQ. God’s Word can baffle those with the sharpest intellect yet be understood by the simplest of people. God is no respecter of persons.

Applying our hearts unto wisdom

Let us not think, however, that understanding the more academic side of our faith, knowing our first principles inside out, somehow qualifies us for salvation. We need to seek the Lord on a daily basis to obtain true wisdom from Him. Our desire to have the Lord in our hearts needs to be nourished by feeding on His Word. It is this that elevates our thinking above that of those around us.

Proverbs tells us that it is the regular diet of the Word of God which bestows on us wisdom: “For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of His mouth cometh knowledge and understanding” (2:6). If we truly desire wisdom, our immersion in God’s Word has to be of paramount importance to us. It means finding time in our daily schedule to allow God’s thoughts to permeate our thinking. A failure to make a conscious effort to do so means that the tempo of our busy lives will easily find other things for us to do.

When we turn to one who calls himself “greater than Solomon” (Mt. 12:42), we find the fullest possible expression of wisdom in a human life. We are told little about the Lord Jesus’ early life, yet even what we do know emphasises his obtaining of wisdom. Luke informs us that as a child he was “filled with wisdom” (2:40) and that he “increased in wisdom” (v. 52). Mark expands, telling us later that “he began to teach in the synagogue: and many hearing him were astonished, saying, From whence hath this man these things? and what wisdom is this which is given unto him, that even such mighty works are wrought by his hands?” (6:2).

From an early age, then, the Lord Jesus was replete with the wisdom given by the Father. With a deep understanding of what his Father had given him to accomplish, he knew precisely the path he had to tread, and his focus on these things—even at the cost of his own life—was a powerful witness to those around him.

Yet the point about the wisdom of the Lord Jesus is that even he had to apply himself to obtaining it. It was not simply handed to him on a plate; he had to work hard for it to permeate his very soul, to equip him to show justice and

judgement to those around him. Isaiah paints us a telling picture of how this was achieved: "The Lord GOD hath given me the tongue of the learned [lit. learner], that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: He wakeneth morning by morning, He wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned [learner]. The Lord GOD hath opened mine ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away back" (50:4,5).

What do we see but the very same humbling of self to receive God's Word that Solomon wrote of? There is no rebellion against the course his Father has set before him, even though this will lead to his death. Isaiah depicts the Lord absorbing instruction from his Father day and night. God's wisdom was not given as of right, even to His beloved Son; it required to be diligently sought for. And this began by the Lord Jesus listening to his Father. Wisdom involves listening and keeping quiet.

In the verses which follow it is easy to see Christ before his accusers at the judgement seat of Pilate, where he identifies the contrast between the judgement of men and the righteous judgement of God. There is much comfort for us here in the way the Lord finds strength in his most testing hours: "He is near That justifieth me; who will contend with me? let us stand together: who is mine adversary? let him come near to me. Behold, the Lord GOD will help me" (vv. 8,9). The Lord knew that there was nothing that Pilate's court or the judgement of this world could condemn him for, because he had absolute confidence in the righteous judgement of his Father to save him. Here is true wisdom, displayed by a trust that God's righteousness will ultimately deliver him. We do well if we harness the same confidence, the same wisdom in our lives.

Christ the wisdom of God

The world is an unjust place, and as Christians we are often seen as a soft target because of the attitude we adopt towards life. But confidence in God is not weakness. Our strength is in a God Who can save. He says to us, "Who is among you that feareth the LORD, that obeyeth the voice of His servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath

no light? let him trust in the name of the LORD, and stay upon his God" (v. 10).

So often we find ourselves weighed down by problems known only to ourselves and our Father. But whatever dark places we are in, let us look to the supreme example of our Lord Jesus, who applied himself to understanding and wisdom to be able to look beyond present difficulties to the joy set before him. If we can do the same, even on the smallest scale, then our uncertainty and worry can be transformed into reassurance and confidence. Writing to Jewish believers who were themselves under great pressure and in need of reassurance, the Apostle James counsels: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him" (Jas. 1:5). If we feel we need help from God to be able to discern matters which are troubling us, let us get down on our knees and ask for it.

Then the "wise man . . . endued with knowledge . . . [will] shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace" (3:13-18).

Showing wisdom in the way we treat one another may not sound a very difficult thing to do within the Brotherhood, where we are all motivated by the desire to bring forth glory to God and therefore not in competition with each other. Displaying it to those in the world who are set against us may be a far bigger challenge. So may we at all times, like our Lord, listen to the words of God in all humility, redeeming the time, and live lives based upon sound judgement in the choices we make, trusting in the Lord, not leaning on our own understanding, but aspiring to the wisdom that is from above as we wait for him who has shown us the way.

The voice of God must always create in the heart of man the consciousness of responsibility. I mean we cannot read this holy word of God without being brought face to face with some moral accountability. This is the supreme difference between the voice of God and the voice of man . . . When it speaks I know that I am in the presence of the final voice—I cannot escape its challenge, I cannot hide from its accusation.

Dennis Gillett, *May You Know It to be True*, p. 118.