

What Is Biblical Wisdom?

Crucial Questions

R. C. SPROUL

What Is Biblical Wisdom?

Crucial Questions booklets provide a quick introduction to definitive Christian truths. This expanding collection includes titles such as:

Who Is Jesus?

Can I Trust the Bible?

Does Prayer Change Things?

Can I Know God's Will?

How Should I Live in This World?

What Does It Mean to Be Born Again?

Can I Be Sure I'm Saved?

What Is Faith?

What Can I Do with My Guilt?

What Is the Trinity?

TO BROWSE THE REST OF THE SERIES,
PLEASE VISIT: **REFORMATIONTRUST.COM/CQ**

CQ

What Is Biblical Wisdom?

R. C. SPROUL

What Is Biblical Wisdom?

© 2020 by R.C. Sproul

Published by Reformation Trust Publishing
a division of Ligonier Ministries
421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771
Ligonier.org ReformationTrust.com

Printed in China
RR Donnelley Asia
0000620
First edition

ISBN 978-1-64289-234-5 (Paperback)
ISBN 978-1-64289-235-2 (ePub)
ISBN 978-1-64289-236-9 (Kindle)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without the prior written permission of the publisher, Reformation Trust Publishing. The only exception is brief quotations in published reviews.

Cover design: Ligonier Creative
Interior typeset: Katherine Lloyd, The DESK

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sproul, R. C. (Robert Charles), 1939-2017, author.

Title: What is biblical wisdom? / R.C. Sproul.

Description: Orlando, FL : Reformation Trust Publishing, a division of Ligonier Ministries, [2020]

Identifiers: LCCN 2019035545 (print) | LCCN 2019035546 (ebook) | ISBN 9781642892345 (paperback) | ISBN 9781642892352 (epub) | ISBN 9781642892369 (kindle edition)

Subjects: LCSH: Wisdom literature--Criticism, interpretation, etc. | Bible. Psalms--Criticism, interpretation, etc.

Classification: LCC BS1455 .S69 2020 (print) | LCC BS1455 (ebook) | DDC 223/.06--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019035545>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019035546>

Contents

One	Introduction to Wisdom	1
Two	The Nature of Wisdom	13
Three	The Psalms	23
Four	Proverbs	33
Five	Ecclesiastes, Job, and the Song of Solomon	43

Chapter One

Introduction to Wisdom

As a college student, I majored in the academic discipline of philosophy. On the first day, in the very first philosophy course that I took, the professor wrote the word *philosophy* on the board. He then broke it down into its etymological derivation. *Philosophy* comes from the Greek, and of course, the Greeks are usually seen as the founding fathers of Western philosophy—first with the pre-Socratic philosophers; then with Socrates himself; followed by Plato, Aristotle, and others.

What Is Biblical Wisdom?

The word *philosophy* combines two important Greek words: the first part of the word comes from the Greek *phileō*, which means “to love.” We are familiar with this word in the English language because we all know the meaning of the city of Philadelphia—the city of brotherly love.

Some may also be familiar with this word from Jesus’ conversation with Peter in John 21, where Jesus repeatedly asks Peter, “Do you love me?” (vv. 15–17). In this exchange, the New Testament uses two different words that are both translated by the English word *love*. The first is *agapē*, which is the spiritual love, the zenith of love, the kind of love that God sheds abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. And there is also *philia*, which is used for brotherly love and affection. This is the word that was joined here to the word *philosophy*.

The second part of the word *philosophy* comes from another Greek word, *sophia*, which is the word for “wisdom.” When you combine these words, *philia* and *sophia*, the simple meaning of the term *philosophy* is “the love of wisdom.” This intrigued me as a college student in my first course in the study of philosophy because I naturally assumed that by studying philosophy I would learn all about wisdom in a practical sense.

However, I soon discovered that Greek philosophy, for example, focused on abstract, weighty questions in metaphysics (the study of ultimate being) and epistemology (the study of the process by which human beings learn). It is true that historically in the discipline of philosophy, one of its subdivisions is ethics—particularly, the science of normative ethics, which is the study of imperatives on how one ought to live. And normative ethics was certainly a concern of the ancient Greeks.

Socrates was convinced that proper conduct, or right living, is intimately connected with right knowledge. That is, for a person to behave in a courageous manner, he must first understand what courage is and what courage means. So, Socrates was convinced that philosophy was not just an unrelated, impractical, abstract discipline of human speculation but very much concerned with concrete daily living. He was concerned about the decadence of Greek civilization in his day, and he saw that the Greek culture was in the process of disintegration because it had lost its moral foundation.

It's amazing how many parallels there are between the Greece of Socrates' day and America of today. So many of the same crises are being visited. But despite Socrates'

What Is Biblical Wisdom?

concern for ethics, Plato's penetrating research into the idea of the good, and Aristotle's full volume on the science of ethics, when we think of philosophy today, for the most part we think of the other areas—the speculative investigation into metaphysics and epistemology.

When we come to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, we see a completely different emphasis on the pursuit of wisdom among the Jews compared to the Greeks. When we speak of the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, we're referring to the group of books that includes Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Job. The Wisdom Literature was understood as a special kind of literature among the Jewish people in the ancient world. There are obvious differences between the dramatic narrative of Job, the love song of the Song of Solomon, the prayers of the Psalter, and the aphorisms of Proverbs; nevertheless, a single motif carries through this entire body of literature that we call wisdom.

It has been said of Greek philosophy that the assertion that there is one God who is sovereign over all creation was a very late development in the pursuit of philosophy among the ancient Greeks, that it was, in a sense, the conclusion of their philosophy rather than something that was

manifested early on in their search for truth. By contrast, for the Jew with his sacred Scriptures, the very first line of the Old Testament says, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). There is no attempt on the first page of Genesis to offer any argument, reason, or proof for the existence of God. It simply starts with the statement about the God who is God over all creation. Monotheism isn’t the end of the trail as it was for the Greeks; it’s at the very beginning of the sacred writings of the Jews.

One of the reasons the Jews did not feel constrained to give speculative arguments for the existence of God is that they were convinced that God had already quite ably done the job Himself: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). The question that concerned the Jew was not whether there is a God but rather *who* that God is. What is His name? What is His nature and character? And the whole of the Old Testament focuses on God’s self-disclosure—the unveiling of His character, His person, and His nature to His covenant people.

The body of literature that we find in the middle of the Old Testament called the Wisdom Literature affirms

again and again that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps. 111:10; cf. Prov. 1:7; 9:10). For the Jew, wisdom meant an understanding, practically speaking, of how to live a life that is pleasing to God. It was the pursuit of godliness that was the central concern of the writers of Hebrew Wisdom Literature. And they say at the very beginning that the absolute, foundational, necessary condition for anyone to have true wisdom is that he must first possess and cultivate a fear of the Lord.

This fear is not the terror that a prisoner in a concentration camp experiences every time he hears the footsteps of his torturer. Martin Luther called it a filial fear. It’s the fear of a child who is in awe of his father and doesn’t want to do anything that would violate his father and disrupt their loving relationship. This fear consists of reverence, awe, and respect. When the wisdom writer says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, he is saying this: If we want to acquire actual wisdom, the absolute, essential starting point at which we begin and continue that quest is in a posture of reverence and adoration for God.

By contrast, David tells us that “the fool says in his heart, “There is no God”” (Ps. 14:1). Wisdom is constantly

being contrasted with foolishness. We must understand that in Hebrew literature, the term *fool* or *foolish* does not describe a person who lacks intelligence. To be foolish to the Jew is not necessarily to be stupid—a person could be erudite, extremely learned, and still be called a fool. One of the harshest judgments that we could receive from the mouth of Christ is to be called a fool. He told a parable of the rich fool who had great prosperity and was preoccupied with the quest for riches, saying, “I will tear down my barns and build larger ones” (Luke 12:18). God said to that man: “Fool! This night your soul is required of you” (v. 20).

According to the Bible, to be called a fool is to be deemed irreligious and godless. The fool is the person who has no respect or reverence for God, and when someone does not have any reverence for God or adoration in his heart toward Him, his life will inevitably show it.

We also see that the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament makes a clear and sharp distinction between wisdom and knowledge. They are not the same, for even the most learned people and the most sophisticated scholars do foolish things. A person can have unbounded knowledge but not have wisdom. Sometimes we are educated beyond our

intelligence to the point that we haven't quite grasped the fruit of concrete living despite the knowledge that we have been able to acquire.

It has been said by secular commentators that twentieth-century civilization experienced an unprecedented explosion of knowledge along with an unprecedented period of violence and moral decay. Humanity has tamed its universe—we can go to the moon, cure diseases, and build powerful computers—but we can't tame the impulses of our own hearts. We have acquired knowledge, but we lack wisdom. And the Wisdom Literature teaches that we can possess knowledge yet never have wisdom.

However, the reverse is not the case—we cannot have wisdom without knowledge. The anti-intellectual spirit of our times would rejoice in the proposition that we don't need to study the Bible or theology—that all we need is a personal relationship with Jesus. But that faulty conclusion is on a collision course with what the Wisdom Literature teaches. The Wisdom Literature says: Get knowledge, but above all, get wisdom. The purpose for learning the things of God is the acquisition of wisdom—we can't have wisdom without knowledge. Ignorance breeds foolishness, but the knowledge that we must pursue to gain this

wisdom that is more precious than rubies and pearls is the knowledge of God.

The writers of the Wisdom Literature understood this principle: there can be no real human wisdom until we first know the character of God. For the Jew, wisdom meant living a life that is pleasing to God. How can we know how to live in a way that pleases God if we don't know the God we're trying to please? Far from repudiating knowledge, the Wisdom Literature places knowledge in its proper perspective. The same kind of thought is found in the New Testament, where we read that “‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor. 8:1). We can have knowledge and become proud and arrogant in our knowledge, lacking the love of God. But these are not either/or—we must have knowledge *and* wisdom, knowledge *and* love, not an ignorant love or an ignorant wisdom.

Proverbs 8 contains a magnificent poetic expression of the nature of wisdom in which wisdom itself is personified. It begins: “Does not wisdom call? Does not understanding raise her voice?” (v. 1). And in verses 22–24, we read these words: “The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there

were no depths I was brought forth.” In poetic expression, we are told that before God ever created the world, He had from all eternity, within Himself, His own personal wisdom. The first thing that God expressed before He even expressed Himself in creation was this eternal, divine wisdom.

The Apostle Paul, in the New Testament, links this wisdom to Christ, who is called “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). If there is a link between the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament and the teachings of the New Testament, it is that the wisdom of God points us to the absolute wisdom of God—Christ Himself.

Can you remember as a child being asked what you wanted to be when you grew up? How did you answer? When I was asked that question as a child, I said I wanted to play baseball for the Pittsburgh Pirates. What was your driving ambition or your main aspiration? I have rarely, if ever, met someone who would answer that question by saying, “I want to be wise.” We want to be rich, successful, famous, and comfortable. We do not live in a day and age that puts a high value on wisdom. But in Old Testament Israel, life was hard and life seemed cruel. Simply surviving required a certain element of wisdom. Solomon,

for example, was so extolled for his wisdom that even the queen of Sheba journeyed just to learn from his wisdom. Yet today, we won't even travel as far as across the street to gain wisdom. We neglect God's Word, which is the supreme textbook of all wisdom. And in that regard, we have become fools.

We publish books that proclaim the historic Christian faith to new generations.

These are books you can trust.



Order your copy of this title, download the ebook version, or browse our entire collection at [ReformationTrust.com](https://www.ReformationTrust.com).

Who needs wisdom?

Wisdom isn't something only needed by the foolish and immature. All of us are called to grow in wisdom, for true wisdom has to do with pleasing the God who made us.

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul introduces the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament. He shows that wisdom goes hand in hand with being godly, and he demonstrates the Bible's practical guidelines for a well-lived life that honors the Lord.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

Dr. R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



ReformationTrust.com

ISBN 978-1-64289-234-5



RELIGION / Biblical Studies / Wisdom Literature