

Post-It Notes From God: The Way of Wisdom
By Jason Huff
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Deuteronomy 4:5-6; Mark 6:1-2; Proverbs 2

Friends, our final Scripture reading tonight comes from Proverbs 2. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles and to pull out the insert from your bulletin to follow along. Let's listen to the Word of God. "My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless, for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones. Then you will understand what is right and just and fair -- every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you. Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men, from men whose words are perverse, who leave the straight paths to walk in dark ways, who delight in doing wrong and rejoice in the perverseness of evil, whose paths are crooked and who are devious in their ways. It will save you also from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words, who has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God. For her house leads down to death and her paths to the spirits of the dead. None who go to her return or attain the paths of life. Thus you will walk in the ways of good men and keep to the paths of the righteous. For the upright will live in the land, and the blameless will remain in it; but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the unfaithful will be torn from it."

"There is more to faith than being saved." That's a provocative Post-It note from God, doesn't it? We talk about salvation a lot. We want everyone to know that through faith in Jesus, they can be saved from sin and death and separation from God. We teach that faith is not just thinking that Jesus is Savior and Lord but also becoming His disciple, following closely after Him to please Him. These things aren't just important, they're essential. But to focus on salvation exclusively is to think a marathon is all about crossing the starting line. The life of faith is a journey, and while we look to eventually arrive at the Kingdom of God, the journey isn't supposed to end where it begins. God wants us to grow and mature as His people.

World Magazine is a weekly magazine similar to Time or Newsweek from a deeply Christian perspective. Every quarter, they get a scathing letter that criticizes them for writing about film and arts and sports and secular culture. "Get back to the basics," they say. "All you're supposed to do is preach salvation." But Joel Belz, the editor of World, disagrees. We are called to see everything in life through Christian lenses, even things that don't immediately shout "Christ!" World Magazine seeks to shed God's wisdom on world events.

Wisdom is what helps us keep all things in perspective. Wisdom keeps us mindful, honest, slow to judge, slow to anger, and quick to forgive. It's a quality recognized by all cultures, even those that have no gods or thousands of them. What's wise in some cultures is seen as foolish in others. But our world needs wisdom.

This last week has been full of painful news stories. A racially-motivated shooting death. The suicide of Robin Williams. Immigration. Iraq. Israel. The doctors brought back home after being infected with the Ebola virus have made news. What's worse is that editorial pages, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and commentaries are filled with people behaving badly...people creating more anger, more hostility, causing more pain and suffering around things that are already very sensitive. We can have informed opinions about those news stories, but the lack of wisdom people show about them has been stunning.

How do we respond to the world wisely? How do we live wisely? How do we become wise? Proverbs seeks to answer those questions. Proverbs is a collection of wisdom, mostly from Solomon, King David's son. Proverbs doesn't contain answers to every question or deal with every possibility. It does give us insight into how the world works and what God desires from us. Most proverbs are sentence-long truths. Our series is only going to spend a couple of weeks in Proverbs looking at some of its key teachings, but it's a place you can turn when you are ready to learn the best of human wisdom and insight that's inspired by God.

Our chapter today is all about wisdom. It helps us learn what it is, what it does, where it's from, and how we obtain it. So let's go deeper. *There are three key concepts Proverbs 2 teaches us about wisdom. First, wisdom has a source: God. Second, wisdom has a purpose: protection. Finally, wisdom has a result: integrity.* Let's look at each of those.

The source of wisdom is God. Verse 6 says, "The Lord gives wisdom." That follows verse 5, which tells us the core of wisdom is "the fear of the LORD and the knowledge of God." Wisdom comes from being near God, revering Him, being awestruck in His presence and aware of His power, conscious that it is only by His goodness and mercy that you can know Him at all.

Can you remember when you met someone you were totally awestruck by -- a musician or actor or celebrity -- and you got that feeling in the pit of your stomach? You didn't know what to say because you were so overwhelmed? That's the kind of feeling that God inspires in the hearts of the wise. It's a good thing. The wise recognize Him as so supreme, so wonderful, so superior, that the very best reaction to Him is awe.

God's wisdom comes from His mouth, verse 6 says. That means that we find wisdom whenever we hear God speak. When we look in His Word, we find wisdom. When we hear it proclaimed in worship, we find wisdom. When we listen to the lyrics of a hymn or praise tune, we find wisdom. Anywhere we hear the genuine Word of God, wisdom is there for the taking.

Second, wisdom has a purpose: protection. Verses 7 and 8...for those who practice wisdom, God holds victory; He acts as a shield for them; He guards and protects them. If you want to have spiritual defenses against the storms of life, wisdom is the way to spiritually resist. I'm asked a lot, "why have all these things gone wrong in my life?" And sometimes it's simply God's hard providence. Sometimes, we've done nothing wrong and it's just a result of a broken and messed-up world. Why do people suffer from depression and diabetes? Why do the young die? Why do evil people get away with murder, figuratively and literally? It's a broken world; we can't explain everything.

But many difficulties come from a lack of spiritual wisdom. We haven't sought after it and done whatever we wanted. There's nothing mystical or magic about spiritual wisdom. Acting wisely protects us naturally. It guards our hearts. It gives us courage to do the right thing and stand up to the crowd that disagrees. It keeps us away from paths that naturally lead to ruin and destruction. Wisdom keeps us safe from spiritual harm. It doesn't make us wealthy; it doesn't give us the perfect life; it doesn't mean that we won't have to endure the same sufferings everybody goes through as a result of living in a sinful world. But we are safe with God, and much of our lives are happier, stronger, and more joyful when we practice wisdom.

Third, wisdom has a result: integrity. Our translation this evening uses the word "blameless" twice tonight for those who follow wisdom. It translates the Hebrew root *tamim*, which means wholeness, completeness, and innocent integrity. Not only does wisdom work to protect us, when we practice it, our lives come into focus. Rather than being disjointed and disconnected, everything works together. Our lives are integrated – all the parts fit.

That's why I seek out wisdom – I need integrity. I need the whole of my life to be driven by God. I can easily compartmentalize my life. I have racquetball in the mornings, sermons and Bible studies and church leadership to prepare during the day, meetings at night. I have family time in there; I have a few spare moments for a book or a TV show. But often those things fit into little boxes. When I make a few bad shots or my racquetball glove splits, it's easy to forget my commitment to Christ. Same is true with what I choose to read on the Internet or watch on TV. But wisdom knits things together. When we choose to follow God's path, He connects the dots between all those things. We start to see our interest in things that don't fit passing away.

That ultimately leads to blamelessness. Now that doesn't mean sinlessness; we always need Christ's salvation from our own bad choices. But we can learn to live in ways where, even when things go badly, we can say in all honesty, "I did my faithful best." I don't know if your mom ever did this to you, but I can still remember a couple of times when I would want to do something really stupid and she'd say, "I won't stop you, but if you do that, you'll have nobody to blame but yourself." And she was right! The result of wisdom is being able to look back, even when the job falls through or the car breaks down or the deal goes south or the basement (or the mortgage) goes underwater, and saying, "I was faithful to God, and that's what matters."

All right, so we've seen that wisdom is all around a great thing. But what is wisdom, biblically? *Just as wisdom has three key elements – a source, a purpose, and a result – wisdom has three ingredients: knowledge, understanding, and discretion.* These words have some carryover, but knowing what each one means biblically will help us get the big picture.

First is knowledge, and the biblical meaning of the word is light years away from our culture's definition. In our culture, knowledge is information. My friend Carlos who won \$94,000 on Jeopardy? He's a master of information. Some people would call that knowledge. Remember Trivial Pursuit? That's knowledge to some. But it's just the tip of the iceberg.

The biblical concept of knowledge is not just cognition – getting the facts into your brain – but perception, getting a clear view of the subject. It’s getting a 360 degree picture of the situation. If the only time you ever see me is when I’m speaking from the stage, you don’t know what the top of my head looks like. You don’t know what the back of my shoes look like. You don’t have complete knowledge. Biblical knowledge is having the whole concept in view without blinders or misconceptions or pre-judgments. To be wise, our knowledge has to be as true and as broad as possible.

Then there’s biblical understanding. Understanding is discernment; it’s being able to take all the information and knowledge you have, that clear view that we just talked about, and being able to discern the full truth about the subject. Understanding means that you can perceive multiple viewpoints and come to good conclusions about what’s going on and actions to take.

Let’s illustrate the difference between the two with a hot-button topic. Let’s go with immigration. We want to be biblically wise in discussing the subject. Knowledge means we get all the facts, not just the ones coming from either side. We educate ourselves about the what, when, where, and why. We find out what the various points of view are. As best we can, we get all the data so that we aren’t making false assumptions or making decisions beyond our grasp.

Biblical understanding goes to the next level, and it takes all that data, and it asks, “What does this mean?” We balance the needs of the country versus the needs of others. We balance legal versus illegal immigration. We balance the plight of children in grave danger at the border versus the grave danger that we encourage by making the borders porous. We also balance our nation’s view of immigration with the viewpoint that we see in Scripture, where the Israelites and, later, the Christians were told to show extravagant hospitality to the foreigner, the alien, and the stranger. That understanding comes from doing the hard work of processing, thinking, praying, and searching not only the newspapers and the Internet but God’s Word.

The final part of wisdom is biblical discretion. It’s not mentioned as often, but it shows up in verse 8. It’s a hard word to understand in both Hebrew and English. The idea is carefully, purposefully, and cautiously taking action. As one book put it, it “tests what is uncertain and avoids danger.”

In our example, it would be taking action that shows that we have thoughtfully and prayerfully considered our choice. It wouldn’t be writing blogs about how we should send everybody back across the border and shoot everybody who tries to cross. It also wouldn’t be giving amnesty to anybody who can step foot onto American soil. It would be working to show Christian love and compassion, both to the immigrant who is suffering and to the citizen who may suffer because they’ve come.

Discretion is unusual these days. But discretion saves friendship. It tells hard truths without jumping into offensiveness. It is moving when God says “move” without hesitation, but not beyond. In some situations when there is great danger, discretion means running in the opposite direction as fast as you can. Discretion is the part of wisdom that takes action – action that brings glory to God, reconciles people to Him, and avoids temptation before it becomes sin.

Our passage gives us two examples of paths that wisdom protects us from, and they show the three parts of wisdom working together. We have the example of the wicked men and the adulteress. They are described through wisdom's eyes. We see each clearly. Both wicked acts and adultery don't start with deeds but words. Idle talk, planning, scheming, coveting, desiring, flattery, flirting – they are just words, but words that lead to destruction. That's perceptive.

There's understanding that these things have human pleasures associated with them. The wicked men revel in their wrongdoing; the adulteress promises companionship and delights. Wisdom does not ignore the temporary pleasure gained from sin. Instead, wisdom looks at it head-on and says, "There are short-term gains but permanent losses." The path of the wicked men becomes crooked; go down that path far enough and there's no one left to trust and no path seems right. The adulteress' house "sinks down to death." All those pleasures cannot bring back innocence, genuine love, and affection that can only happen in the covenant of marriage.

And discretion delivers us from these folks. When we pursue wisdom, it's not even a choice to go down those roads because we know all too well where they lead. The temptation goes away because we've become so clear-headed about the end results. How wonderful is that kind of wisdom, where temptation holds no interest because we see ahead to the final results, of righteousness and eternal life on one hand and wickedness and eternal death on the other!

So we've seen the three elements of wisdom and the three ingredients of wisdom. What's left? *We have the two-fold path to wisdom. To be wise, one must seek wisdom, and one must to turn to the LORD, the giver of wisdom.*

First, we have to seek wisdom. Do you remember how cereal boxes used to come with a prize inside? Did you ever shake the box around every which way until you finally got that the toy out, covered in little bits of Lucky Charms? We worked so hard to get a two-cent toy! How much effort do we put into going to see a play or a show? We line up babysitters weeks in advance and set aside the money to go; we check the times, check the reviews, buy the tickets; and we do all that just to spend two hours together in the dark!

We put a lot of effort into insignificant things. We know how to seek what we want. Let's seek wisdom. Verse 4 says to seek it like silver. Verse 1 says to treasure it. Verse 2 says make your whole self available to receive it; verse 3 says to cry out for it. That's our calling. Search your Bible; pray. Make it a priority to seek after God, and be open to hearing what He has to say. Turning your ear to Him and apply what He teaches.

That obviously leads us to the second part of the path: we must turn to the Lord, the giver of wisdom. We can go searching for wisdom in all the wrong places. It's not going to be found on the evening news or in the pages of a blog. Some wisdom? Sure. But only in as much as it reflects God. We have to turn to God for wisdom. As verse 6 says, God gives wisdom. It is a gift. It is not something that can come through our effort alone. It is granted by God. But looking for wisdom without turning to God is like looking for Christmas presents under a rose bush. You're simply in the wrong place! God wants to give us good gifts. He wants to give us wisdom. But we must go to Him for it and ask for it. That's the way to true wisdom.

The way of wisdom isn't easy. It requires hard work. But God wants it for us. Through it, He protects us, and we become men and women of integrity. Let us be people of knowledge, understanding, and discernment. May we be wise in God's eyes. It will save us from the paths that lead to destruction and lead us ever closer to the One who lives and reigns forever. Amen!