

Wisdom to Live By
Wisdom in Counterpoint - A Threefold Guide
(Proverbs/Job/Ecclesiastes)

Introduction:-

The three books of the Old Testament that are considered to best represent wisdom are Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. Derek Kidner in his book “Wisdom to Live By” (1985, p.116) says that if one had to design a cover for each of these books, drawn from their own contents, one might represent them by the various houses they describe. For Proverbs it could be appropriately described as the seven pillared house of wisdom, or better still that gracious well-stocked home of the accomplished wife, whose virtues the book brings to its serene close. For Job we have a very different picture, perhaps represented by the wreckage in which his family perished when a great wind came across the wilderness, and struck the four corners of his house, leading to the ash heap in which he banished himself. As for Ecclesiastes, its insistence on the transience of earthly life and glory, could hardly find a better symbol than its own description of a great house in the final chapter of the book (12:3-4) in the grip of slow, inexorable decay. Thus between them, the three books clearly cover three aspects of existence which no one can afford to overlook. Proverbs brings before us the demands of practical, good management and life-skill, based on wise observations about life. Job brings before us the enigma of human calamities that are beyond control or explanation. Finally, Ecclesiastes brings before us the tantalizing hollowness and brevity of human life, based on death. In the end, each helps to enrich and expand upon each other, as iron sharpens iron, in the words of Proverbs 27:17. How then can these books bless us today?

1. First we turn to Proverbs.

Proverbs can best be understood as an anthology of the Proverbs of Solomon, as well as other wisdom sources, and as such covers many different situations in life, which would not otherwise be covered by covenant law, such as we find in books like Exodus and Deuteronomy. And if by wisdom God brought creation into being, proclaimed at Proverbs 3:19-20, and later at Proverbs 8:22-31, thus creating a coherent and meaningful universe, then wisdom, understanding and knowledge, are not only built into the very fabric of the cosmos, but are also the means by which the cosmos continues to function, and through which God continues to sustain this world, seen in Proverbs, through home and society. This is precisely why the book of Proverbs can also pronounce a blessing upon those who find wisdom, understanding, and knowledge at Proverbs 3:13-18, following its stated aim and purpose at

Proverbs 1:1-7; for she is a Tree of Life to those who take hold of her, implying delight and refreshment that ensures eternal life. This creation theme may be mirrored in the sevenfold structure of the Book (Chapters 1-9; 10:1-22:16; 22:17-24:22; 24:23-34; 25-29; 30:1-19; 30:1-33; 31:1-31), in which wisdom also builds its house with seven pillars at Proverbs 9:1-6, representing a large and perfect house, with ample room for all to come to her feast. This reflects the words of Jesus at John 14:2:- “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if that were not so, would have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?” Throughout the book of Proverbs, wisdom is contrasted with folly, who at Proverbs 9:13-18 also sits at the door of her house, at the highest point of the city, calling out to all who pass by, but those who enter her house, and feast upon her food, are without any sense, and only enter in order to join the realm of the dead. Is it any wonder then, that the book of Proverbs concludes its reflections at Proverbs 31: 10-31 with the house of the noble woman, which describes the ideal wife with terms and expressions used elsewhere in the book only for Lady Wisdom. She is the incarnation of wisdom in everyday life, as the embodiment of the book’s virtues, and a concrete example of what it means to fear the Lord. In fact, one scholar feels that the centre of this poem about the ideal wife comes at verse 23, which says: “Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.” In other words, behind every respected and successful man, there stands an even greater and more successful woman in God’s eyes, who has made her husband’s position possible. In fact, the final verse 31 says: “And let her works bring her praise at the city gate.” In many Hebrew Bibles, Proverbs 31 is immediately followed by the book of Ruth, in which Ruth begins to stand as this kind of wife. This poem also concludes at verse 30 with the “fear of the Lord”, which is the theme and presupposition of this book back at Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10, and as such, not only provides a frame for the book, but is the main prerequisite for acquiring wisdom. The fear of the Lord is not an exercise in negative fear and anxiety, but is rather the beginning of a journey in wisdom (*cf.* Deuteronomy 5:29), because it first of all entails the *humility* to accept the book’s teaching (See Proverbs 22:4), out of the conviction that God supports its wise observations made about life, from the smallest of human observations to the greatest, rewarding the faithful with life, and punishing the unfaithful with death. And as framing the book, it also provides the reader with a theological perspective on life, as well as a means to discover truth about God in the world. In the end, wisdom in Proverbs can be understood as “life skill” or the ability to navigate life with success and blessing, and its overall message can be described as preventative medicine, rather than curative medicine. In other words its message seeks to prevent us from even entering the path of the wicked, rather than try and pick up the pieces when the wrong path is taken. Proverbs reminds me of a highway sign that says: “Wrong Way – Turn Back!!” May we find this wisdom and blessing in the fear of the Lord,

which is the beginning of all Wisdom, for Proverbs 14:27 says: “The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, turning a person from the snares of death.” May we experience the blessing of this path, in the coming year.

2. Secondly, we turn to Job

How might this book encourage us today? A real clue to solving the complexity and message of the book may be seen in the question of the Satan at chapter one and verse 9. “Does Job serve God for nothing?” And so for this book, the question is: “Can a person retain their faith and loyalty to God when they do not receive the rewards they are entitled to expect, but the very reverse?” It is easy to “fear God” when one is prosperous, and when everything seem rosy in the garden, but can the same attitude be maintained within the context of inexplicable adversity? Perhaps many of us may be travelling down that path today. The main part of the book is a long poem found between chapters 3:1-42:6, with a prose prologue found at chapters 1-2, and an epilogue at chapter 42:7-17. It has been thought that the poet framed his poem in a story about Job which was already well known to him. Whether or not this is so, the poem can only be properly understood in its prose framework, where the writer portrays a discussion in heaven between God and the Satan, his inspector of affairs on earth. The crucial question is raised, whether Job fears God for nothing, and the Satan is given permission to test Job by depriving him of everything except his life. While the reader knows this, it must be remembered that Job and his friends are entirely ignorant of this fact, so that when one calamity after another strikes, Job has to face them in complete ignorance that this is a “test case.” In spite of all, Job refuses to curse God, but accepts the suffering as he has accepted prosperity. This point also reinforces the fact that the unseen world is the real world, where spiritual destiny is also determined and worked out. The main part of the poem is then taken up with three cycles of speeches, in which each of Job’s friends seek to comfort him, and Job replies to them. After this, Job sums up his argument, and seeks an audience with God himself, so that he may present his case (Job 19:25-27). His three friends, from somewhat different points of view, all take the traditional line that misfortune such as Job is experiencing, can only be the result of sin. Job, on the other hand, protests his innocence throughout, perhaps not an absolute innocence, but at any rate a relative innocence, which deserves something better than his present misfortunes. Following the three cycles of speeches, a wisdom poem is found at the centre of the book at Job 28, which appropriately addresses the issue of where true wisdom is to be found, presented in the form of a riddle. Up to this point, none of Job’s three friends has comprehended wisdom. The poem itself is divided into three sections, with the final section in verses 21-28 providing the answer as to where true wisdom is found. The answer is that God alone knows the way to wisdom and where it dwells, because he alone

exercised wisdom in the various works of his creation, after which he was able to look at wisdom and appraise it, as well as confirm it and test it. And then in verse 28 God said to the human race, in confirmation of Job as the truly wise man: “The fear of the Lord is wisdom, and to shun evil, is understanding.” This anticipates the divine speeches of Yahweh in chapters 38-41, who finally comes to Job in the whirlwind, not to hear his complaint, or address the question of innocent suffering, but to show his greatness by asking searching questions about the mysteries of the Universe. These speeches from the Lord serve the purpose of expanding Job’s horizon about God’s creative plan, freedom and sovereignty within the universe. This then leads Job to a place of humility before God, with a repentance not of personal sins, as demanded by his friends, but with a repentance of *insufficient knowledge* of God. That is precisely the challenge that the Lord poses to Job in 38:2: “Who is this that obscures my plans with words *without knowledge*?” Finally at 42:1-6 Job confesses that God’s ways within the universe are too wonderful to even try and understand, and so he repents in dust and ashes, the very symbol of his suffering back at 2:8. His understanding about God is now the difference between “hearing” about God, and “seeing” God (42:5). And maybe this is the real challenge of this wisdom book. The turning point for Job was the Lord’s final appearance to him at chapter 38. Every difficulty and challenge in life requires a theophany, and this appears to be wisdom’s contribution in this book. We have just celebrated this great truth with the Christmas story, when God finally decided to become flesh, and dwell amongst us. Has this now expanded our understanding of God in a saving way, as it did for Job’s restoration, as well as for Job’s friends. Can we now say: “Once I was blind, but now I can see.” Finally at 42:10 we read: “After Job had prayed for his friends, the Lord restored his fortunes, and gave him twice as much as he had before.” Here we find grace and justice walking hand-in-hand as the end of this story. May this book also bless us today, with grace, justice, and hope.

3. Thirdly, we come to Ecclesiastes.

In the opening chapter of this book we are introduced to the Teacher, whose task throughout the book is to impart wisdom and knowledge to the people. But in his search for knowledge through many different proverbs, he found that life was also “meaningless” or “absurd”, and thus “fleeting” and very difficult to comprehend, found at the frames at 1:2 and 12:8. The Hebrew word *hebel* occurs 36 times in the book, and literally means “breath”, but its precise meaning within the book is much debated, also depending upon context. A parallel expression is “a chasing after the wind” indicating that the translation “meaningless” (NIV) is not a final conclusion, but an utterance of despair, just as one cannot catch the wind, so the meaning of life seems utterly elusive to the Teacher. One of the main themes of the book is introduced at

the very beginning at 1:3 – “What do people gain from all their labours at which they toil under the Sun?” In other words, what profit margin is there at the end of the day, after all is said and done? The Teacher then begins to explore this question through wisdom, but even concludes at 1:12-18 that this exercise was meaningless, and a chasing after the wind. One of his great frustrations about life was that the one fate comes to all, whether one is wise or foolish, and so why be very wise? Further, time and chance happen to all (9:11), also death and mortality are great frustrations as well as enigmas to toil and achievement, for the wise and righteous are not remembered after death, and a fool may inherit the toil and riches of the wise (2:18-19). Jesus used this thought in the Parable of the Rich Fool at Luke 12:16-21. One writer even suggests that Ecclesiastes could be accurately described as a report on the failed quest for eternal life, reflecting the early chapters of Genesis 1-4, not only about the issue of perpetual existence, but especially about the sense that one’s life and work are fundamentally meaningful rather than of no lasting value. Both these issues regarding “toil” and “eternal life” are linked at 3:9-11, immediately after the poem on time at 3:1-8. But just in case we may be tempted to call Ecclesiastes a purely pessimistic book, driven by scepticism and total despair, we need to note the presence of seven “joy” passages throughout the book, beginning at 2:24-26, where a person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their toil, for this too, is from the hand of God, and without God, who can eat or find enjoyment? But within most of these “joy” passages, the sinner’s lot is one of frustration and despair, because if God fails to grant them the ability to enjoy his gifts, then they are taken away and given to others. In the sixth joy passage at 9:7-10, even those approved of God experience meaningless days, because death ends all earthly enjoyment and toil. Finally in the seventh and last joy passage at 11:7-12:7, life is sweet and is to be accepted joyfully. But a shadow falls upon it. Night comes when no one can work. Here we recall the words of Jesus at John 9:4: “As long as it is day, we must do the work of Him who sent me; Night is coming, we no one can work.” And so too for his 21st Century disciples who follow him today. There is an end to the opportunities of service in this life. For the Preacher the end was vanity at 11:8b. But for the believer in Christ and fellow-labourer with Him, it is “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master (Matthew 25:21; Hebrews 6:10). Then the Preacher addresses young people from 11:9-12:1. To such he recommends a full and enjoyable participation in life, whilst recognizing that youth is transitory. But never does he commend the search for happiness as an end in itself, or advocate unbridled licence. The happy youth is the one who takes God into account, and lives in the light of His judgment. For young people, with the whole of life before you, a relationship with God in Christ is essential for making the most of this life. Mark well the significance of the words at Ecclesiastes 12:1. “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before

the days of trouble come, and the years approach, when you will say, “I find no pleasure in them.” Youth is the golden opportunity for making your best decision in life. I took this step at age 16. Will you do the same? Will you give Jesus Christ the best years of your life? That is wisdom at its best! And God will reward that! The following verses in 12:2-8, then speak of the inevitability of growing old, followed by death itself. In a deeply moving passage, old age is pictured as the winter of life, when all warmth and light have departed (v.2). In the succeeding verses the various members and faculties of the body are viewed as a household which has known the ravages of time. Notice the allusions to the arms, legs, teeth and eyes in verse 3, followed by increasing deafness to the sounds of birds in verse 4, to the fear of heights, followed by the white hair of old age, and the increasing inability to function (v.5), finally leading to one’s eternal home. Finally, the concluding verses at 12:9-14 are the key to the book, even though scholars recognize that they do not fit easily into the argument of the book. It is more likely however, that the final editor of the book credited the Teacher or Preacher with his own wise advice within the context of the book, to make the most of things. Through his own diligent research, the preacher was credited with writing what was upright and true, resembling God’s remarkable declaration to Job at Job 42:7, that Job, unlike his friends, spoke what is true about God. And the conclusion of the matter is to fear God, and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all humankind, because to become truly human, we must obey God who made us in His image. Further, this life, so apparently pointless, is not the end. There is a hereafter, in which all the apparent injustices of life will be rectified. God’s judgment, flagged at 3:17 and 11:9, will become the final solution to humankind’s eternal questionings. What appears to be so perplexing to humans will find its answer at God’s judgment seat.

Conclusion:-

How do these three wisdom books encourage us for our journey today in life? Using the imagery of the three houses, Proverbs builds us a house with seven pillars, and invites us to feast on its words as the Tree of Life, which prevents us from taking the wrong road in life. Job’s fallen house allows us to see that God does not forsake the righteous, and even though they fall, God will raise them up again, with even greater blessings. Finally, the aging house of Ecclesiastes allows us to see the brevity of human life in the light of eternity, and even though life can be frustratingly difficult and hard to fathom at times, God is with us right throughout life, from youth itself, until our hair turns grey, and because that is so, our enjoyment of God’s presence will last forever. Amen.