

Psalms and Proverbs – ChristChurch 15th May 2011

Introduction

There are many questions that I have in life that I want to know the answers to. Some of them are profound, some of them less so. Here are some unanswered questions I have.

- Why is the word abbreviation so long?
- Why is it that doctors call what they do practice?
- What's another word for thesaurus?
- If corn oil is made from corn, and vegetable oil is made from vegetables, then what is baby oil made from?

Now obviously, these are not that important, but where do people turn to for answers? The immediate response that computer users have is to Google it, or to ask Wikipedia. For those who don't know computers, Google searches the whole of the Internet and Wikipedia is an encyclopaedia that anyone can update. While we sometimes get good information from these sources, often it is not completely accurate. Those that know of these shortcomings want definitive sources of information, so look elsewhere. As Bertrand Russell puts it,

“What men want is not knowledge, but certainty”

We don't want information, we want the right information. I don't want to know about one idea of many; I want to know about the idea that will make everything better. And so book manufacturers play on this desire by claiming to be the definitive voice on a particular topic. Ironically, these books are given the title bibles, as these pictures show.

We have the Food bible, but then to beat that, we have the Green Food bible. We have bibles for Fashion and Tri-athletes, and then for computer nerds like me, we have a bible for Excel and even one for Social Media like Facebook and Twitter; all claiming to have definitive answers in a world of relativity.

But these bibles show us one of our flaws as a culture. I don't see a bible for solving poverty, or feeding the hungry, or curing the inequality in our world. Our books and social media are me-focused. Social media in particular shows our self-centredness, providing an ability to blather about anything and everything, no matter how banal. Again for those less technically aware, the main use of Facebook and Twitter is to update your status to let your friends, or any random punter, see what you are doing, thinking or commenting on. It is aimed at providing connections, but instead allows me to tell the world that I'm eating an ice-cream and it's yummy, and other trivialities. The problem with our emotion and our knowledge is that 'I' is important, not 'we' or 'God'.

Martin Luther King puts it this way.

“Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men”

Facebook can be used for great things, like promoting anti-bullying groups, pushing agendas that help the poor, helping lonely people stay connected. But in general, I think that it leaves people empty as there is a lack of open discussion about emotion, helpful connection with people, or purposeful engagement with wisdom. This is where the Biblical books of Psalms and Proverbs differ. In them we see real wisdom, natural emotion in all its varied forms and God's total engagement in people's hearts and lives.

And so today, we want to look at three things. Firstly, we want to look at what real wisdom is from the book of Proverbs. Secondly, we want to look at the warts and all view of emotions that Psalms shows us is the only way we can authentically interact with God. Finally we want to look at how these wisdom and worship models from Psalms and Proverbs affect our lives today in our interactions with God, with each other and with the world around us.

Purpose of Wisdom

Have you ever seen those motivational pictures that some people have hanging up in their offices to try and encourage them to work harder to reach success. Here's a couple I found on the Internet.

- Achievement – Believe in yourself and anything becomes possible.
- Ambition – Create the life you dream of with every choice you make.

As a student I found some alternative posters, known as demotivational posters. Here is a few of them.

- Procrastination – Hard work often pays off after time, but laziness always pays off now.
- Persistence – It's over man. Let her go
- Motivation – If a pretty poster and a cute saying are all it takes to motivate you, you probably have a very easy job. The kind robots will be doing soon.

I think quite often people look at the book of Proverbs as a series of self-help sayings to try and encourage them to live better and do better. But Proverbs has a very different view of itself. It's not about trying to do better, it is about gaining wisdom. Listen to what Proverbs 4 verses 5 to 7 say.

⁵ Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or swerve from them. ⁶ Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. ⁷ Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding.

It's pretty blunt in this section. We should be striving after wisdom and understanding. But as with all passages of Scripture, we need to understand the context within which this passage is being spoken, both in terms of the book, and the overall story of the Bible. It is too easy to believe our role is to get smarter. But if we go back to chapter 2, we see that the pursuit of wisdom has a much higher calling than purely gaining knowledge.

¹ My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, ² turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, ³ and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, ⁴ and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, ⁵ then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. ⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. ⁷ He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless, ⁸ for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones. ⁹ Then you will understand what is right and just and fair—every good path. ¹⁰ For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. ¹¹ Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you.

This is a very clear definition of what wisdom is about. Wisdom is about knowing God, not about knowing more. Our goal in teaching the overview of the Bible is not so that you can know the overview of the Bible, but that you can know the one who oversees the Bible. If my time speaking makes you know more stuff, it has not been a success. If you know God more, and more about your relationship with Him, then I have been successful. As 1 Corinthians 12 puts it, "if I can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge ... but have not love, I am nothing".

Now it's clear from verses 7 to 11 of chapter 2 that the pursuit of understanding the fear of the Lord and finding the knowledge of God will have consequences – God will hold us secure, guard our course, protect our way. But that safety has to be understood in the context of relationship with God, rather than the knowledge itself. Gaining wisdom, but ignoring God, leads to disaster. This happened to Solomon at the end of his life, where he got his priorities wrong and turned away.

It's not about knowing everything God knows, but trusting Him to teach us what we need to know when we are earnestly seeking Him in daily relationship. And being in relationship with Him requires us to be completely open and honest with God and ourselves, which is where we turn to now in the Psalms.

Singing when we're winning (and losing)

One of my favourite football chants is the one where fans of one team shout "You're not singing anymore", to the opposing team's fans. It generally happens when one team does well at the beginning of a match, and the fans start singing, but the other team comes back to overtake the first team, and the first team's fans go quiet. It has led to the phrase –"Sing when you are winning".

And in some senses, this is my issue with social media, and a lot of our personal interactions. Facebook users long for more friends, so that they can compete with classmates or colleagues to see who has the most friends. People show photos of their holidays, or their nights out, or their new toys. But do people go on Facebook when they are struggling, other than to moan about the weather or their jobs. Or do people remove friends when relationships are fractured, other than to make a point to a jilted partner. I know of someone who has a debilitating illness. Looking at him on Facebook would make you think everything was fantastic. Looking at him in reality shows that it is not.

And what about church? We are sitting in church today with people who are struggling with addiction, dealing with relationship crises, coping with older parents that need care and children who are out of control. Do I know the names of the people who are in these categories? Probably not, because if we ask people how they are doing, we generally get the response, "not bad", or "doing okay". Do we desire to look good at the expense of truly divulging the difficulties in our lives, like the person on Facebook with 300 friends, but feels lonely every night?

Casting Crowns have a song called Stained Glass Masquerade. Listen to some of the lyrics

*"Is there anyone that fails, is there anyone that falls, am I the only one in church today, feeling so small.
Cause when I take a look around me, everybody seems so strong. I know they'll soon discover that I don't belong
So I tuck it all away, like everything's okay. If I make them all believe it, maybe I'll believe it too.
So with a painted grin, I play the part again, so everyone will see me the way that I see them.*

*Are we happy plastic people under shiny plastic steeples with walls around our weakness and smiles to hide our pain
But if the invitation's open to every heart that has been broken maybe then we close the curtain on our stained glass
masquerade*

*The performance is convincing, we know every line by heart, only when no one is watching can we really fall apart.
But would it set me free if I dared to let you see the truth behind the person that you imagine me to be.
Would your arms be open or would you walk away? Would the love of Jesus be enough to make you stay?"*

Can any of you identify with this? When you are asked how you are doing, do you respond with a non-descript okay? Why in church of all places do we feel the need to cover up our emotions? We can't hide them from God, so why do we try and hide them from each other.

David shows a different way. The book of Psalms shows David in his interactions with God, through high and low points, but constantly looking to God as his source of life, light, guidance and wisdom. There are howls of lament and delight of dancing and instruments. There is the deep sorrow of repentance and the great joy of forgiveness. I know most of you go through the same rainbow of emotions that I do and that David did, but why do we not express them?

The book of Psalms shows that it is alright to be completely honest with God, whether we are winning or losing, that's what we are supposed to do. The three Psalms that those following the E100 readings for this week will be getting to are Psalm 23, 51 and 103. These Psalms show completely different emotions in David, from the trusting 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want' in Psalm 23, to the confession of Psalm 51 'For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me', to the unrestrained praise of Psalm 103 'Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name'.

Reading these three Psalms did cause a bit of a problem for me. I had a sermon all ready in my head about how Facebook is me-centred and the Psalms are God centred, but then I realise that the Psalms have quite a lot of self-focus in them too. But then God guided me to the realisation that enables me to be who I truly am before God.

If you have your Bibles with you, have a quick glance at these three Psalms while I'm talking (if you are a woman who can multi-task, if you are a bloke, best just do one thing at a time). When we look at these three psalms, they show us the difference between self-centeredness and self-awareness.

Some of our songs like to focus on what I will do for God, and how long I will trust and follow. But the Psalms focus not on what I will do, but on what God does. God is the one who leads me, restores my soul and keeps me safe in the valley of the shadow of death in Psalm 23. God is the one who blots out my transgressions, washes away all my iniquity and cleanses me from my sin in Psalm 51. God is the one who redeems my life from the pit, crowns me with love and compassion and satisfies my desires with good things in Psalm 103.

And from these nine things that God does for me, and the many more things that can be found in these three Psalms and all of the one hundred and fifty Psalms in the book, we see how we can be ourselves with each other. We can be ourselves because God is working to make us more like Jesus. Too often Christians and the Church have looked arrogant and judgemental because we sing when we are winning about good living, but try and cover up the sins in our lives. We need to sing about God's goodness in the times of defeat as well as the times of victory because we know we are not the finished masterpieces that God has promised to make us.

David sees when he needs to rejoice, and sees when he needs to repent. He acknowledges in Psalm 51 the evil that he has done against God. He had to admit to God and to himself that the cause of his difficulty, which in the case of his affair with Bathsheba the difficulty was the death of his child, was his rejection of God. He needed to recognise that he was sick before he could be made better.

My Dad nearly died a couple of months before Gemma and I got married. We tease him about it quite a bit. The difficulty came when Dad was in lots of pain in his side. Mum was worried about him, and after a while, said that he should call a doctor because it looked like the pain that I had experienced when I needed my appendix taken out. Dad, who is not a great patient, was quite adamant in explaining that it couldn't be his appendix, as the pain was on the other side than the appendix. So Mum left him be. After a short time, Dad was rushed to hospital with peritonitis caused by a burst appendix, and it was touch and go, but praise God, everything was okay.

So what was Dad's difficulty? He thought his appendix was on his left side, so when mum said it was maybe appendicitis, he said it couldn't be. A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. Dad needed to admit that he didn't know, that he was sick, and that he needed help. Because he didn't, he nearly died.

As individuals and as a church, we need to know our weaknesses, we need to be able to discuss where we are falling short and we need to acknowledge our sin before God and each other. Please don't get me wrong, I'm not encouraging full-scale confessions about inner secrets the minute you walk in the door on a Sunday morning. But I am talking about having people in church with whom we can be totally open about our shortcomings. And we need to be okay answering the question "how are you doing" with an honest "pretty rubbish". We need to be willing to go to the prayer ministry team after church and ask for them to lift us up before God. We need to be humble enough to ask for help from Dot or someone else on the pastoral care team. We need to feel able to speak to the elders about our lives without feeling embarrassed.

Admitting our weaknesses and singing when we're not winning helps us to encourage each other and helps us to grow. As Damien Rice sings, "It's not hard to grow, when you know that you just don't know".

Or as Philip Yancy puts it

"I now view the Beatitudes not as patronising slogans, but as profound insights into the mystery of human existence. God's kingdom turns the tables upside down. The poor, the hungry, the mourners and the oppressed truly are blessed. Not because of their miserable states, of course Jesus spent much of His life trying to remedy those miseries. Rather, they are blessed because of an innate advantage they hold over those more comfortable and self-sufficient. People who are rich, successful and beautiful may well go through life relying on their natural gifts. People who lack such natural advantages, hence under qualified for success in the kingdom of this world, just might turn to God in

their time of need. Human beings do not readily admit desperation. When they do, the Kingdom of Heaven draws near.”

We can share our weaknesses, as David did, because we trust in an Almighty God who saves and does the work to forgive us and restore us. When we admit our weakness, we see our need for God. Our strength is not in always maintaining a perfect life, but in being in relationship with the God who picks us up when we fall. Our joy comes from praising God through all life’s varied seasons.

That’s where we get the variety of Psalms from; the joy, the sorrow and the hope for tomorrow. And this variety of Psalms should reflect the diversity in the church, some young, some old, some doing well, some struggling, all working together for the furthering of God’s kingdom, where it’s okay to be weak, because the King is strong.

Wisdom and Worship for us today

So practically, how do we take these models from Psalms and Proverbs and help them influence our day to day lives. I have four suggestions, but would encourage you to chat after and come up with some more.

1. **Seek Wisdom.** Actively engage in activities that enable you to learn more. Don’t be content with what you know, always seek to know God more, to know yourself more, to know each other more. If you need help in knowing how to do this, talk to some of the elders or home group leaders who may be able to find resources that suit you. Go on the Reasonable faith course. Read books, listen to music, engage with knowledge. Each of us will have different abilities and different focuses, but make a priority the pursuit of wisdom.
2. **Make time for God.** As we have noted, seeking wisdom is not just for knowledge’s sake, but to know God more. However to know God more, as in any relationship, we need to invest time into it. Does your diary allow you the time to spend in the presence of God? If not, change your diary. This is too important to leave until next year.
3. **Acknowledge the difference between earthly and heavenly wisdom.** We need to be aware that what we hear through advertising, through friends, through our society in general is a perceived wisdom which is different from God’s wisdom. Ensure that you are aware of where this is a struggle for you. Don’t accept the motivational clap-trap which encourages us to push through the pain, to work harder for our own goals, to try our best to be the best. God’s kingdom doesn’t work that way. Our perspective has to be on Him, and His goals, not that which will get us onto a list of influential people.
4. **Sing whether you are winning or losing, and even if you are tone deaf.** Try and be real with how you are doing. If you are doing well emotionally, spiritually, physically or financially, share the wealth. Allow God’s good work in you to encourage others. If we are struggling emotionally, spiritually, physically or financially, don’t suffer in silence for fear of judgement or gossip. The Kingdom Jesus preached encourages us that blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those that mourn. God’s plan won’t always include plain sailing, but He will have provided comfort in His people.

I couldn’t do a sermon on the Psalms without reading my favourite, which I think has influenced my view of my life in the good times and the bad. The key is not the circumstances of my life (verses 1 – 4), but the nature of my God (verses 5 and 6), and it is with this recognition of God’s strength in my weakness, His wisdom in my foolishness and His unfailing love in my topsy-turvy life that we will end.

¹ *How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?*

² *How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?*

³ *Look on me and answer, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;*

⁴ *my enemy will say, “I have overcome him,” and my foes will rejoice when I fall.*

⁵ *But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.*

⁶ *I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me.*