

Introduction to Wisdom Literature, II

Having discussed the corpus and character of wisdom literature in the previous lecture, we will now turn to its contribution. What is the contribution of wisdom literature? First of all, it touches all of life. I am convinced that wisdom literature deserves greater attention than it often gets in our churches and in our own lives. It is beginning to get more attention. For a while, here in the United States, many people would carry little New Testaments rather than Bibles. The New Testament is less than a quarter of the Bible. Then sometimes people would get a New Testament and Psalms. Now you can even buy a New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs. But it would be even better if more of us in the West took advantage of the full translation of the Old and New Testaments that is available to us. The Old Testament, including the wisdom literature, is beginning to get more attention. It deserves great attention. Why do I say that? The Bible is intensely interested in life and how to live it, and we ignore its instructions to our own peril and to the peril of our children. And how quickly we do that.

We in the West say, “Spare the rod and spoil the child,” because we think that that is biblical, but it is not exactly right. What do we find in the proverbs dealing with child discipline? Proverbs 23:13-14 says, “Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death.” Now, let me say at the outset that I am aware that there is child abuse in our societies. I am not advocating child abuse. But I do think it is a distortion of biblical truth to suggest that any corporal discipline is child abuse. That is something that is very confused in our society. But notice the difference between the biblical proverb and our saying. We say, “Spare the rod and spoil the child.” Ah, little Johnny is a bit spoiled—such a shame. Well, he will grow out of it. But the Bible says that Johnny will be absolutely ruined. “Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death.” That is a little more sobering.

Proverbs 13:24 says, “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.” Discipline is not easy, and it is never fun. It takes energy to discipline a child, but if you love him or her then you will take the effort to do it. Proverbs 19:18 says, “Discipline your son for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death.” Proverbs 22:6 is a favorite, the interpretation of which is somewhat questioned: “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.” Some construe that positively, others construe it negatively. Is this a promise? Often people claim this as a promise, although it is sometimes interpreted negatively. “Let a child go his way, commit him to his way, and even when he is old he will not depart from it. He will not grow out of his misbehaviors; they will just change their manifestation as he gets older.

When we were in Germany we had a little neighbor girl who one day was found with a stick in her hand beating my son Phillip over the head. She was about his same age but she was bigger and tougher than he was at that time. My wife rescued our son and took the daughter up to her mother and said, “You know, this is getting a little dangerous. She has this big stick and his head is still soft.” The girl’s mother was a good woman, but her response was, “The problem is you intervene too much. If you will just leave them alone she will eventually realize that what she is doing is hurting him and she will stop.” The mother thought the girl would realize that what she was doing is socially unacceptable. We have to put the sticks down at some point. But as we get older, if we are never disciplined, we only come up with more sophisticated ways of inflicting harm and hurt. We do not grow out of these bad behaviors. Let a child go his own way and even when he is older he will not depart from it. That is the negative way to look at this proverb. We will talk about how to view that proverb in a later lecture.

Proverbs 22:15 says, “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.” That is the biblical view of fallen human nature: we, even as children, are born in sin. This

does not mean that the sexual act that brings us into being is a sinful act, but it means that we are born sinful, indicted, and guilty. “Folly is bound up in our hearts.” Quintessentially, of course, God’s work in our hearts will drive this folly from us fully. But He uses the discipline of parents to help us walk the straight and narrow and keep us away from the paths onto which we should not stray. “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.” One time we were discussing this in a small group and one of the men in the group said, “I take that rod metaphorically. I am one of those who would never, ever, under any circumstances, spank my child.” Spanking, done in the right way and in the right spirit, leads to a right restoration and expression of love. Many people do not understand that, and I do not have time to explain it further, but do not just go wailing away on children in your anger. That is child abuse. Spanking is something entirely different and even children know that. But this man was saying, “I could never do that because I was physically abused. I could never, ever spank my daughter.” Another woman in the group said, “I was verbally abused. I got so many tongue lashings I wished my parents would simply spank me and get it over with.” And I think, in fact, that she had the better point. Had her parents simply said, “An offense has been committed, this is the punishment, here it goes, and we are doing this because we love you,” that would have been so much more constructive than the tongue lashings she received or the beatings the man received. “I do this because I love you.” We should say that and mean it as we discipline our children in love. It is important to say that so that they know it is not an expression of anger or hatred, but it is an expression of love. And then it is over and done with and a loving relationship is restored. That is far better than tongue lashing. When is that over with, when does that hurt stop, when does the loving restoration come? There is room for difference of opinion, but the Bible does say that “the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.” There does seem to be a place for corporal discipline. Proverbs 29:15 says, “The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left to himself disgraces his mother.” We have all seen this happen and some of us may have experienced it. Children do get away from us.

I think the reason I get excited about these books is because they talk about real life. They talk about life where we live, and they talk about all of life. They touch all of life in some way, shape, or form. They also touch all of us. Hassel Bullock in his *Introduction to the Wisdom Books* says: “One might read the Pentateuch and see only a faint shadow of himself reflected there, or the historical books may overwhelm him with facts and events. The prophets by some mere chance may pass him by with their deep convictions and concerns about their own societies and world, but the poetical books find him where he is. We cannot escape because this is where we live.”

We rear children, we struggle with how to use our wealth, and we struggle with our own laziness and the necessity of industry. We struggle with our tongue, our stubbornness, and our unwillingness to be teachable. All of these things are addressed in the wisdom books. They touch us where we are and draw us into wrestling with these things.

Derek Kidner says, “A lecture or a sermon with its one-way flow can make its points tidily and at leisure, but a lesson that draws the hearers into answering and asking, into working things out painfully, may well get further into the mind than any discourse, even if at times it deliberately leaves many questions unresolved.” Even if we cannot figure it all out, even if we are left with a few loose ends, we still may have learned more in the process because we are struggling with real issues and real life.

That brings me to my third and final point that I wanted to mention. Another reason that I get so excited about these books is because these may be the first way of touching unbelievers. One of the other professors here at Covenant talks about finding common ground with unbelievers where you can and then developing a bridge to them. We should look for a place to start with them and to understand them. Well, we are all in this life together. We all struggle with those things that I enumerated earlier, and

families particularly struggle with child rearing. Often our neighbors who do not know the Lord are still struggling to raise their children. They love their children and want to do right by them, but they may be clueless. They may look at us and say, “How can you do that?” Or, “Why do you do that?” Without perhaps saying right away, “Well, it says in the Bible...” you could say, “This is the way my parents trained me, and a book of ancient wisdom says that is the way to do it.” This could start a conversation—by dealing with some practicalities. You could help them see how there is wisdom there and then gradually point them more and more to its source. That can be the entrance of our unbelieving friends into the Word of God where they will find true light. Do not think that in sharing the Gospel you must always share the entirety of the Gospel the first time. You may begin by sharing a part of the Gospel that has to do with one little issue—one little problem in that person’s life.