

What Is Wisdom?

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When we consider the great doctors of the Church, something immediately appears to be common to them: They are all saints. “Of course, they are saints,” you might say; “what did you expect them to be?” But why should we expect them to be saints? Christians are canonized because they have loved, not because they have thought. The Church holds up St. Thomas Aquinas to us as the greatest of her teachers, no doubt in part because of his extraordinary mind. But why should it also happen that he should possess the overflowing heart of St. Francis? Put another way: Why are the wise also saintly? Holy Scripture provides us a guide for the answer.

Wisdom in the Wisdom Books

Five books of the Old Testament are generally considered the “Wisdom Books”: Ecclesiastes, Job, Proverbs, Sirach, and The Wisdom of Solomon.

Ecclesiastes raises the ultimate question facing the wise man: “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (1:3). The Preacher, there, never finds a real answer to this question, as he foreshadows in his despairing cry: “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!” (1:2). All the pleasures that men desire fail to give meaning to man’s existence (1:12, 2:1 ff.). Even his own wisdom he judges finally to be but a striving after wind. (1:17). The tragedy of man’s life, which the wise man discovers and faces, is death. No matter what goods he may enjoy now, death will rob him of them all: “How the wise man dies just like the fool!” (2:16-17). Because of death, faith seeking understanding fails; all that is left is faith: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man” (12:13). The wise man knows he must resign himself to God, accepting what comes from Him even though he has no hope of finding satisfaction in it. Job is in anguish for much the same reason as the Preacher is tempted to despair: What good is man’s life? The difficulty Job faces in answering that question is not the fact of death, but the fact of suffering. Why does the good man suffer? For seven days he sat silent in the ashes pondering that question in the agony of his soul and proclaiming his failure in a heart-wrenching cry: “Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night which said, ‘A manchild is conceived.’” (3:3). The wisdom Job seeks is to understand the plan of God in the suffering of the innocent, and conversely, in the success of the wicked. But like the Preacher, he knows he is doomed to failure. The wise man would be the one who understands the plan of God in allowing, even bringing about, the suffering of the innocent. He must be content with faith: “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding” (28:28).

Wisdom in Proverbs and Sirach

If human wisdom is fearing God and keeping His commandments, a part of it must be knowing how to keep His commandments. God therefore offers us the books of Proverbs and Sirach, which offer hope: “To fear the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom” (Sirach 1:14). Wisdom is not unattainable. Proverbs and Sirach present wisdom to us under the figure of a woman who entreats us to seek her and promises she will come when we turn away from the earthly city and pursue her: “If you cry out for insight and raise your voice for understanding ... then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom ... he stores up sound wisdom for the upright” (Prov. 2:3-6; Sir. 4:16-18; 6:19-22). Both books present wisdom as one present from the foundation of the earth: “When he established the heavens, I was there ... when he marked out the foundation of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master workman” (Prov. 8:27-31). “Alone I have made the circuit of the vault of heaven and have walked in the depths of the abyss” (Sirach 24:5). Wisdom was with God in creating, but what is it? Both Proverbs and Sirach clearly state that wisdom is not God, but a creature. “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old” (Prov. 8:22). “From eternity, in the beginning, he created me, and for eternity I shall not cease to exist” (Sirach 24:9). The portrayal of wisdom in these books is indeed wonderful, and yet strange. How can wisdom be eternal and yet a creature? If it is not God, how could God create through a creature? Didn't He create all things from nothing?

The Book of Wisdom

The book of Wisdom, written in the person of Solomon, summarizes many points we have seen so far. But on the question, What is wisdom?, he takes a different approach. He says it is, above all, knowledge of the goodness of God and of his power: “But thou, our God, art kind and true, patient, and ruling all things in mercy ... To know thee is complete righteousness, and to know thy power is the root of immortality” (15:1-3). But wisdom is more than the wise man's knowledge of God; it is also the very Providence of God at work since the fall of man to save all men from ultimate disaster. Wisdom is that which God gives to men so that they might know His plan for them. Finally, wisdom dwells with God — it is something of or intimately from God Himself: “For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty ... She is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness” (7:25-26). Wisdom is then some sort of procession (a “breath,” an “emanation”) and a reflection (a “mirror,” an “image”). She comes forth from the power of God and images His goodness. To summarize what we know about wisdom in the Old Testament, we know this much: All the works agree in presenting wisdom as an understanding of the providential plan of God in creation. This is what Job and Ecclesiastes seek but cannot find, while it is what Proverbs, Sirach, and Wisdom promise will be given to those who seek. Moreover, we see that wisdom is variously presented as with God from eternity, as at work in the creation of the world and the salvation of man, and as dwelling in individuals as a gift from God. The book of Wisdom goes further and identifies wisdom with the knowledge of God's power and goodness, so that we see His plan for creation as a manifestation of His own divine attributes.

Wisdom in the New Testament

St. Paul speaks of wisdom more than any other New Testament author. Under the New Testament, God has now revealed his plan for creation and he has chosen Paul to bring all men to understand it. For this reason, Paul sees that the conversion of his hearers is only the beginning of his labor. He cannot rest until he has brought his newborn sons into the full understanding of the mystery that Jesus has revealed to him: “And so, from the day we heard of [your faith], we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding ... increasing in the knowledge of God” (1:9-10).

A little later in the letter, Paul speaks of his great labor in bringing them to Christian adulthood: “[Christ] we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ. For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me” (1:28).

So it is natural for the Christian to become wise; spiritual maturity is closely connected to growth in wisdom. Christians are essentially contemplatives. The mystery of God’s plan has been revealed to us and, if we have a living heart, we long with the angels to gaze upon it.

But what are we to contemplate? “[W]e preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:23-24). What a wonder — that the great and mighty wisdom of God should be found in two words: “Christ crucified.”

Paul tells the Colossians that Christ is the beginning and the end of creation: “In him all things were created, in heaven and on earth ... all things were created through him and for him ... He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent” (Col. 1:16-18). So “Christ crucified” epitomizes the plan of God for creation. The idea of “Christ crucified” existed with the Father from all eternity and was the driving force behind the creation of the world. Moreover, “Christ crucified” comes to dwell in the hearts of men so that they might understand the wisdom of God: “To [His saints] God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). Paul says we must strive to become wise. Thus, we must strive to understand “Christ crucified”: “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:20-21). The wisdom of God is this: That He would make Himself fully known through His act of saving those who believe in the folly of Christ crucified.

How then do we become wise? Paul refers us to the one person who, like wisdom in the Old Testament, can say “I was there” at the Creation: The Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:9-12). Since we have received this same Spirit, we too can come to understand the love that God has bestowed on us. The Spirit gives us a share in the resurrected life that Christ now enjoys (Rom. 8:9-11). If we

allow Him, He will continue to develop that life in us, transforming our sinful natures so that we become images and likenesses of God (Eph. 4:22-24).

The essential element in our transformation into the likeness of God is found in love: God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom. 5:5). As the Holy Spirit transforms us according to that love, we can begin to comprehend the love that God has revealed through the cross of Christ: "I bow my knees before the Father that ... he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:14-19).

We can now see why the wise man must be saintly. Christian wisdom is above all the understanding of the plan of God to reveal His merciful love through the death of Christ. But His love surpasses all possibility of human understanding. Only through the transformation of our hearts by the love poured into them by the Holy Spirit can we begin to comprehend its unsearchable riches. As we grow in love, or rather as love grows in us, extending its roots into the deepest, darkest corners of our hearts, we become other Christs, and can taste and see the goodness of the Lord.