

Proverbs 3:13-26 Learn Something New

How are your New Year's Resolutions going? I thought that I would give you a good ten days into 2010 before I asked you that?

I did a little research and the top seven or so New Year's resolutions are these:

To spend more time with family and friends

To give up smoking or drinking

To Get out of debt

To Get fit

To learn something new or to go back to college

To Get a better job

To relax more.

Now, if you've chosen all seven of those, then you really are in trouble, but I wonder if your Resolution fits in there somewhere, I suspect that it may. The big problem though is not choosing or making our resolutions – it is keeping them, isn't it? On January 1st we have the best intentions but by the end of the first week we have often thrown in the towel and resigned ourselves to continuing with life just as it always has been.

What we need is a book which actually helps us to change – if only there was such a thing. Well, good news, there is! God's living Word and it contains just what we need – it's in the Old Testament and it's called the Book of Proverbs.

Now, maybe you've never really read the book of Proverbs. Perhaps to you it all seems rather bitty – in general it's simply a collection of proverbial sayings, but let me explain to you what this amazing book is really like. Do you remember the other week I was telling you about how unnecessarily anxious I get about internet food shopping over Christmas?

Well, to make sure that we got our New Year food from somewhere I booked a delivery back in October from a supermarket that we no longer regularly use. Because I was just reserving the slot I put an old shopping list in the online trolley, paid, signed out and forgot about it. A month or so later we secured a delivery from our regular supermarket and although I meant to go back online and cancel the first delivery – well, you can guess what happened, can't you?

Yep, just over a week ago, the phone rang and it was the driver from Waitrose Deliver just letting us know that he was on the way up the drive with an extra week's shopping! Now in the end it wasn't a disaster because I hadn't ordered too much stuff and do you know what? It was actually quite exciting!

Every single bag was full of surprises – carrots, biscuits, mini cans of coke! Everyday, normal and (in general) practical surprises and the book of Proverbs is a little like that; each chapter a bag full of everyday practical surprises and over the coming few weeks we are going to unpack some of those.

Now I suspect that a lot of people who decide to learn something new as their resolution want to be wiser people, but what is true wisdom? Well, wisdom is not the same as intelligence; G.K. Chesterton and several other literary figures were asked one evening what book they would prefer to have with them if stranded on a desert island. One writer said without hesitation; "The complete works of William Shakespeare." Another said, "I'd choose the Bible."

They turned to Chesterton and asked, "How about you?" "Ahh," replied Chesterton, "I would choose Thomas' Guide to Practical Ship Building." – A wise choice if not a particularly intellectual one and that's the difference - the book of Proverbs is all about practical wisdom for everyday living rather than ivory tower intellectualism.

Derek Kidner in his commentary on this book in the Bible says that the book of Proverbs' "function in Scripture is to put godliness into working clothes."

And we all need "godliness in working clothes" – we need to learn how to make life work for us as Christians, we need everyday godly wisdom. You see true wisdom is not about understanding how snow clouds form and weather patterns develop – that's knowledge, wisdom is about not going outside in January in a T-shirt. And the book of Proverbs calls us to acquire and apply wisdom to our lives. Listen to chapter one;

"The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young— let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance—"

Don't get confused with thinking that the Biblical book of Proverbs is all stuff like "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush", these are not just nice quirky sayings, here is real wisdom, here is an answer (as if one were needed) to the people who claim that the Bible has nothing practical to say about living in the 21st century, because no matter who you are or when you live you need wisdom because wisdom is foundational to life.

But here is the important thing to grasp about wisdom in proverbs, here is what marks wisdom out as different to information. Information is simply information, you can get it from reading books, but wisdom is all about a relationship. You see, Proverbs tells us that wisdom begins by developing a relationship with God. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline."

Now, fear of the Lord does not mean a cringing grovelling anxiety at the feet of a capricious or angry God, no, “fear” in the sense that it is used here means “reverence” or “obedience”, so as The New Century Version puts it, “Knowledge begins with respect for the LORD”

Proverbs asks, “do you want to know how to live life? How to make life work? Do you want to be wise? Then begin by acknowledging and respecting God.” Because in chapter 2 we are told that God is the source of wisdom “For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.”

In chapter 3 we read that God used wisdom to lay the foundations of the earth, that he employed learning to set the heavens in place and “by his knowledge the deeps were divided, and the clouds let drop the dew.” How did God do that? Where you have heard such words before, words describing how God created the universe? “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”

You see, there are many who see Proverb’s description of wisdom as actually being a description of Jesus, that whilst wisdom here in these pages is certainly an attribute of God, wisdom is also personified in Jesus; Jesus who we saw in our gospel reading grew in wisdom and grace. And it makes sense that Jesus and God’s Wisdom are one and the same, because surely if wisdom were merely academic achievement then although desirable, you could never go as far as Proverbs does and say;

“Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.

Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed.”

Yes, academic achievement will be able to acquire gold and silver, but only a relationship with Jesus – God’s wisdom personified can bring you into the paths of peace with God and only if you will embrace him as your Lord and Saviour will he open up to you the tree of life. Only if you lay hold of Jesus and claim his victory over sin and death for yourself will you be truly blessed.

At the moment the adverts for British Gas make the point that our homes are our world, but the author of Proverbs was there well ahead of them, because chapter 24:3 says, “By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures.” In other words your world is only built soundly and safely and furnished well when it is built and established and filled with wisdom.

And it was Jesus who told the story of two men building their homes, one on sandy ground – a home destined to be washed away in the floods of life whilst the other was secure in his home built upon on a rock, Jesus who summed up wisdom by saying, “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.” Do you see the parallel?

So if we want to learn something new this year, if we want to be wise then the place to start is God’s Word and the person to start with is Jesus. Only if we will fear God – respect him and love him will we begin to be wise and only if we build our lives on Jesus and his words will we live truly wise and godly lives.

If we resolve nothing else this year, let's decide to seek for God's wisdom and apply it to our lives and so in the words of Paul to the Christians in Rome; "to the only wise God be glory for ever through Jesus Christ! Amen."