

ISRAEL Teaching Letter

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Wisdom
is as
Wisdom
does



By Rev. Cheryl L. Hauer, International Development Director

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Wisdom

It seems to be one of the most sought after and yet elusive characteristics to captivate the attention of mankind throughout our history. Poets, philosophers, teachers, preachers and politicians have discussed it at length, many claiming to have it themselves while being quick to point out that the rest of us don't. Sophocles reminded us of the importance of wisdom when he said wisdom outweighs wealth. Socrates, on the other hand, praised the pursuit of wisdom as the only means of coming to the realization that we as humans are, in fact, a pretty pathetic bunch who know nothing.

Aristotle spoke often of wisdom, claiming that only through the pursuit of self-knowledge and understanding would we ever gain it. Herodotus proclaimed that there is only one evil we face in life and that evil is ignorance. The one good we should be concerned with, however, is wisdom. Einstein weighed in on the subject as well, pointing out that wisdom cannot be found in the classroom or gained from a text book but can only be achieved through the lifelong pursuit of...wisdom.

In the dozens of books, papers and articles that I read in preparation for this teaching letter, one thought was common to all: we should desire to be wise. Everyone agreed that the pursuit of wisdom should dominate our lives, but decidedly lacking was a description of what it is we are actually looking for. Although everyone agreed we should be seeking it, few told us how we would recognize it if we found it. What exactly is wisdom? What does a wise man look like? As is often the case, only the God of Israel provides the comprehensive answers we are seeking. He tells us, "*Wisdom is the principal thing.*" Then, in over 300 places in His book, He tells us exactly what that means.

Sophocles



Socrates



Aristotle



Herodotus



Einstein



According to
a vast array
of modern
dictionaries...

Wisdom is

...the quality
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and good
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...a body of
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...the ability
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Definition, Definition, Who Has the Definition?

In searching a vast array of modern dictionaries, three main definitions are found that are shared by all of them. Wisdom, according to Webster and many others, is the quality of having knowledge and good judgment. A second definition is that wisdom is a body of knowledge or principles that develops within a specific society or period of time. Finally all agree that wisdom is the ability to think using knowledge, experience and understanding.

In the ancient non-biblical world, the definitions were similar. To the elite of Greek and Roman society, nothing was more important than the pursuit of wisdom. It was considered a virtue and was associated with the ability to think and to accumulate knowledge. The Greeks recognized the wise man as one of knowledge and power, a man of worldly sophistication. The Romans shared that view, defining the wise man as one who knew not just how things were but why they were that way. In both cultures, wisdom was represented by various goddesses, all of whom were kind, chaste and extremely intelligent.

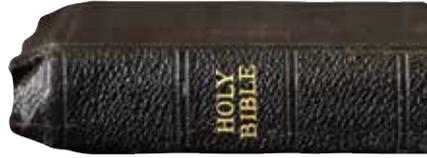
Most of us are familiar with the idea of the wise old owl, that bird being the symbol of wisdom. In ancient Rome, the owl was the representation of the goddess of wisdom, chosen because the owl, more than any other creature, was able to see clearly in the dark.

Such symbolism gives great insight into that ancient understanding of wisdom.

It was the ability to see beyond the obvious, accumulate hidden knowledge and understanding, and then think through to conclusions based on that accumulation. And in that world, nothing was more critical than an understanding of oneself. That, they believed, was the beginning of wisdom.



חָכָם
חָכְמָה



The Bible, however, presents a very different view. There are two primary words in the Hebrew language that are used in the Bible to express wisdom. The first is *chakam* (חָכָם). The word appears nearly 150 times in the *Tanakh* (Gen.–Mal.) and has both a secular and religious application. In secular usage, it signifies a man who was skillful, a craftsman. Those who manufactured objects belonging to the Tabernacle were considered wise, experienced in their crafts. Even a man who was skillful in making idols, or who was proficient in the magic arts, was recognized for his craftsmanship. Cleverness and shrewdness characterized this type of wisdom.

Used in the religious sense, however, *chakam* (חָכָם) excludes delusion, craftiness, shrewdness and magic. God is the source of wisdom; the wise one. The path to wisdom is not found in understanding oneself but rather in understanding that a personal, holy, righteous God has given us the absolute imperative to live in the fear of Him and in accordance with what He expects of His people. **We are only truly wise when we submit ourselves to Him totally, in reverence and obedience.** The wise man, *chakam*, recognizes that God is the source of all of his skills and projects the fear of God into everything that he does.

The second Hebrew word for wisdom is *chokmah* (חִכְמָה). It appears over 140 times in the *Tanakh*, primarily in the books of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. *Chokmah* actually embodies the wisdom that the *chakam*, the wise man, is seeking. It speaks of maturity and the development of a true fear of the Lord. Central to *chokmah* is the desire to follow after and to imitate God as He has revealed Himself in His word, without self-reliance or pride. It speaks of cleaving unto God and receiving from Him knowledge and understanding.

But critical to its meaning is the ability to take that knowledge and understanding and apply it to all of life's situations, using it to make the right decision at the right moment every time. It is not a philosophical exercise, nor is it the ancient humanistic belief in the mere accumulation of knowledge. *Chokmah* can be seen in the actions and decisions of the man who truly loves the Lord with all of his heart, mind and soul; the man who delights to be in the presence of God; the man who is earnest in his study of God's Word and the inculcation of all of its principles; in the man who truly keeps the paths of righteousness. That man knows that it is, in fact, the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom.

Either a Wise Man or a Fool

Throughout the Bible, the life of the wise man is depicted as one of peace and joy. He is blessed with length of days and showered with mercy, truth and faith. Frequently, that life is juxtaposed with that of the fool whose existence is marked by stubbornness, laziness, pride and anger. Whether found in the *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.), the Prophets, or the Books of Wisdom, that juxtaposition sends a clear message. There is no gray area. The decision to embark on the pursuit of wisdom, which is in fact the pursuit of God Himself, brings with it blessings and benefits. Any other decision makes you a fool.

The ancient rabbis were so convinced of this that they wrote and spoke often about the foolish. Different classifications of fools, those sages said, are found in the Bible and each one exhibits a lack of moral character and discipline. They were categorized as follows:

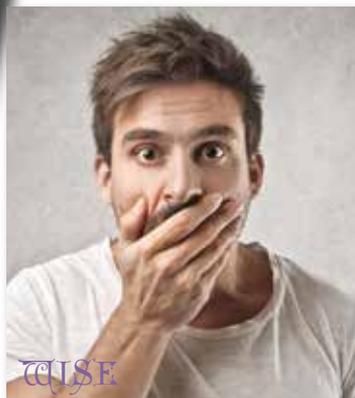
1. First there is the **simple fool**. He is immature, unable to resist temptation and is easily seduced and led astray. He is unaware that those simple choices have consequences.
2. The second category is that of the **dullard**. He is opinionated and stubborn, but lacks the innocence of our first simple fool. The dullard is slow to realize that his actions have consequences.
3. The third type of fool is unfortunately the one most commonly encountered. He is insolent, disrespectful, a **scoffer**. He mocks even the concept of sin and doesn't care that his choices may have negative consequences.
4. Then there is the **boor**, the utterly shameless person whose life is marked by profanity. This fool has moved beyond mocking sin to refusing to believe there is a God in the first place.
5. Finally we encounter the **scorner**. This person has allowed himself to become engulfed in cynicism, having only a negative outlook, mocking all that is in the world. The book of Proverbs tells us that destruction is the only end for the scorner.

The book of Proverbs is rife with descriptions of both the wise man and the fool and by juxtaposing the two, it gives us a very clear picture of both. The wise man will be honored, Proverbs tells us, but the fool will know only shame. A glad father is evidence of a wise son while a brokenhearted mother is a result of a foolish son. The fool is convinced that he is always right while the wise man is quick to heed the counsel of others.

The pursuit of wisdom... is in fact the pursuit of God Himself

The fool constantly shows his anger but the wise man is self-controlled. A fool delights in evil conduct but a wise man delights in a godly life. The desire for instruction marks the wise while the fool who hates correction is simply stupid. The wise man is aware that there are consequences for his actions and he is careful to make right decisions. But the fool on the other hand is deceived, mocks sin and brings condemnation upon himself. Among the wise and upright, there is favor.

The writers of *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers, a book containing Judaic wisdom) dedicate a significant amount of time to the discussion of wisdom. They suggest that perhaps the greatest hallmark of the wise man is self-control. The fool lacks the ability to control himself and constantly gives in to his own passions and evil desires. He is either unaware of or doesn't care about the consequences of his actions. *If it feels good, do it*, is his motto.



True wisdom, however, is exhibited by the one who is in control of himself and has the spiritual strength to stand against temptation. Man is always at war with negative forces and evil desires that would lead him away from the path of righteousness. This war, *Pirkei Avot* says, is much more dangerous than any physical war. A physical enemy can be vanquished once and for all but evil desires return again and again. A physical war threatens one's safety and security, but at stake in a war against temptation and evil desires is one's eternal existence. A physical army is usually fairly easy to spot and their techniques and strategies are common to all armies. Our spiritual

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enemies however are often much less obvious. They are deceitful and clever and therefore, much more deadly than any physical enemy we would ever face.

Wisdom is found in the strength of character and heart necessary to defeat temptation and overpower one's own evil desires. Defeating an external enemy in battle may not be an indication of true power or strength. It may be that the enemy was simply weak. However, when a man cleaves unto the Lord and is able to overcome his own evil passions and desires, he has won a double battle. He is both the victor and the vanquished. This is a man of true wisdom.

Unfortunately, our modern ideal of wisdom continues to be informed by that ancient Greco-Roman view discussed earlier. Wisdom is the accumulation of knowledge, the ability to think, marked by self-absorption, narcissism and a denial of the need for a relationship with God and righteous behavior. Clearly that understanding of wisdom is in fact foolishness. It repudiates the very idea of the fear of the Lord, scorns righteous standards, and mocks the idea of moral discipline. If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, then many a modern "wise man" is indeed a fool.

The Sage

The sage, or wise man, is mentioned repeatedly throughout the Bible, and such men weren't always of the house of Israel. Some were Egyptian, some Babylonian, some were from other pagan tribes that surrounded the nation of Israel in ancient times. In the *Tanakh*, they are all referred to by the word *chakam* that we discussed earlier. Most of those references are in the secular context, referring to an artisan, craftsman, magician or scholar. Even in pagan cultures, the sage played a very important role.

The *chakam* is actually a characteristic Oriental figure, well-known in all of the nomadic tribes of northern Arabia and the Middle East. His role was keeper of practical wisdom in the early nomadic lives of each of these cultures. This was a class of men who maintained the stories that were the history and fabric of each society. In a time when books were unknown, these men were the keepers of past experience, advisers to princes and kings, those who could locate the nearest wells or point out the best route going forward because they had been there countless times before.



With the giving of the *Torah*, the role of sage took on even deeper importance in the lives of the Hebrews. Now the sage was not just the keeper of worldly knowledge and information, but he was an adviser to Moses, a keeper of biblical tradition, one that would help Israel remember what the God of their fathers had done for them. Over the centuries, they would be named among judges, prophets and kings and they would use their knowledge and wisdom to help turn the Hebrews from a group of Egyptian slaves to a nation of free men living in a land given to them by their God.

After the destruction of the Temple and the dispersion of the Jewish people in AD 70, the role of sage would change once again. Without the Temple and its sacrificial system, Judaism would need to reinvent itself. Somehow, history would need to be remembered and passed on. Traditions would need to be preserved. Relevant relationship with the God of the universe would have to be maintained without the sacrificial system and for many, in the difficult situation of slavery, servitude and separation from the rest of the Jewish community. In the unbelievably difficult post-biblical history of the Jewish people, it would be the sages who would keep Judaism alive.

Certainly Christianity has had its sages as well. The apostles in many ways served the same functions as the sages of Judaism. Through them, the history and heritage of the Jewish people would be kept alive, only they would carry it beyond the boundaries of the commonwealth of Israel and into the Gentile world as well. Their eyewitness testimony of the life, death and resurrection of Yeshua (Jesus) would instruct and inform the church for millennia. As *chakamim*, it would fall to them to pass on to ensuing generations all that was needed for Christians to be true disciples of Yeshua.

The Profile of the Wise Man Today

One of the internet sites I visited in the preparation of this teaching letter defined wisdom as the ability to see from God's perspective and then respond according to Scriptural principles. It is an apt definition. A life lived in fear of the Lord, one of surrender and obedience, produces men who can see from God's perspective. And with that vision comes the ability to make the right decision at the right time every time, to respond according to the principles of life found in the Bible. Wisdom is readily visible in the actions of such people. The apostle James (Yaakov) asks the question, "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom" (James 3:13).

The book of Proverbs is a veritable treatise on the subject of wisdom. Verse after verse encourages us to seek wisdom, to live lives of wisdom, to embrace wisdom, to receive wisdom and knowledge from the Lord. And, with each encouragement comes a promise. Proverbs tells us that the dedicated and diligent search for wisdom will without question be a success and with it will come blessings. The Writings of the Apostles (NT) tell us the same thing. If anyone of us lacks wisdom, we are encouraged by the apostle James (Yaakov), we must simply ask and God who gives generously to all will pour it out to us as well.

Proverbs further tells us that as we diligently seek wisdom, we will be empowered to walk in the way of good men and keep the paths of the righteous. We will receive long life, length of days and peace shall be added to us. Mercy and truth will be our constant companions. Grace will be ours, and safety. We will not stumble and we will be kept from harm even in our sleep. We will walk in trust and confidence without fear, and we will be given the ability to do good. Kindness, graciousness and faithfulness will be the hallmarks of the wise man, and God will fill our hearts with joy, give us good health and shower us with His love.

According to *Vine's Expository Dictionary*, the fruits of *chokmah* are many and are revealed as the book of Proverbs gives a clear picture of the character of the wise man. In "New Testament" terms, the dictionary goes on, using the biblical languages, the fruits of wisdom are identical to the fruit of the Holy Spirit listed in the book of Galatians. There we are told, "...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal 5:22). James reiterates that wisdom from God is pure, peaceable, gentle, yielding, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.



Seek...
Ask...
Live...
Embrace...
Receive...
Wisdom from
the Lord

From Deuteronomy to Job, Ecclesiastes to Isaiah, Psalms to Romans and James, the message of God's wisdom given to man is one of the most powerful in all of the Scriptures. We are told that His wisdom is inscrutable, all wisdom belongs to Him, that He is mighty in wisdom, His wisdom is infinite and His ways are unsearchable and unfathomable. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord tells us, "*My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways*" (Isa. 55:8).

Clearly God's wisdom is far beyond human understanding. But seeking after it is in fact seeking after God Himself. Wisdom is His very essence. And nothing brings Him greater delight than to pour Himself out to His children, giving us His wisdom and empowering us to walk in His righteousness.

Wisdom at Any Price

Pirkei Avot tells us that only the one who so passionately desires God's wisdom that he is ready to seek it at any price is considered truly wise. For is it not true, the sages ask, that the one who has lost a precious object, however small it is, will search for it everywhere?

In Luke's Gospel, the story is told of a woman having ten silver coins and, losing one she lights a lamp, sweeps the house and searches carefully until she finds it. And when she does, she calls her friends and neighbors together, rejoicing that she has found that which was lost. Matthew likens the Kingdom of Heaven to a treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he was so overjoyed he sold everything he had in order to purchase that field. Further, Matthew speaks of a merchant who was seeking beautiful pearls. When he found one pearl of great price, he would have given anything and everything that he had to make it his own.

International Headquarters

P.O. Box 1093, Jerusalem, Israel
Tel: (972) 2-624-5004
intl.office@bridgesforpeace.com

Australia

P.O. Box 1785, Buderim
Queensland 4556
Tel: 07-5479-4229
bfp.au@bridgesforpeace.com

Canada

P.O. Box 21001, RPO Charleswood
Winnipeg, MB R3R 3R2
Tel: 204-489-3697
Toll free: 855-489-3697
info@bfpcan.org

Japan

Taihei Sakura Bldg. 5F
4-13-2 Taihei, Sumida-Ku
Tokyo 130 0012
Tel: 03-5637-5333, bfp@bfj.org

New Zealand

P.O. Box 768, Whangarei 0110
Tel: 09-430-2943, bfpnz@outlook.co.nz

South Africa

P.O. Box 1848, Durbanville 7551
Tel: 021-975-1941
info@bridgesforpeace.co.za

South Korea

Studio #2007 Daewoo Trump World
26, Hangang-daero, Yongsan-Gu
Seoul 140-778
Tel: 070-8772-2014
bfp@bfpkorea.com

United Kingdom

18 Heol Ty Gwyn Industrial Estate
Maesteg, Wales CF34 0BQ
Tel: 01656-739494
ukoffice@bridgesforpeace.com

United States

P.O. Box 410037
Melbourne, FL 32941-0037
Tel: 800-566-1998
Product orders: 888-669-8800
postmaster@bfpusa.org



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Such must be our search for wisdom. As we cleave to the God of the universe, loving Him with all our hearts and living our lives in the way that pleases Him, wisdom is ours. With that wisdom comes incredible joy and blessing. They are ours for the asking, ours for the searching. Our God is a God who loves us passionately, who promises to walk with us through every trial and rejoice over us with singing as we submit ourselves to Him. There really could be no greater blessing. And the choice is actually a simple one:

“The wise shall inherit glory, but shame shall be the legacy of fools” (Prov. 3:35).

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Scripture is taken from the New King James, unless otherwise noted.



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