

Wisdom's Choice: A Life Picture

A friend observed that pastors use Father's Day to admonish men on how to be better fathers, but on Mother's Day the church praises mothers for how great they are! We have some unwritten expectations about how to celebrate Mother's Day and Father's Day, so to mix-it-up I have chosen Proverbs 31. For some time I have wanted to preach on this text on Father's Day, because it runs counter to our expectations. Proverbs has a surprise ending. Instead of concluding the book of Proverbs with the sage advice of Solomon or a description of Israel's king, it ends with the the ordinary life picture of a woman who is worthy of our emulation. Men, as well as women, can learn from Lady Wisdom, making it a good text for Father's Day.

Placing Proverbs in the big picture of the biblical canon is important. The five Wisdom Books (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes) form the center of the Bible and they belong in the New Testament as much as the Old. These five books are essential for scriptural formation. They remain as vital to the 21st century disciple of Jesus as they did to God's people in Babylonian captivity. When seen as a unit with the Psalms at the center and two sets of polarities, Job and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs, crisscrossing the center, we begin to understand their essential impact on life. To see this dialectic is to have our perspective forever shaped. Peterson explains:

“Psalms is a magnetic center, pulling every scrap and dimension of human experience into the presence of God. . . The Job-Proverbs polarity sets the crisis experience of extreme suffering opposite the routine experience of getting along as best we can in the ordinary affairs of work and family, money and sex, the use of language and the expression of emotions. . . The Song-Ecclesiastes polarity sets the ecstatic experience of love in tension with the boredom of the same round. The life of faith has to do with the glories of discovering far more in life than we ever dreamed of; the life of faith has to do with doggedly putting one flat foot in front of the other, wondering what the point of it all is.”¹

Job		Proverbs
	The Psalms	
Song of Songs		Ecclesiastes

My earliest memory of Proverbs were these words: *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”* My parents claimed Proverbs 3:5-6 as our family text. The second verse that I remember was the theme of the entire book, *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline”* (Proverbs 1:7).

Is life a matter of lucky breaks or the love of God?

Here's the story of how I became a father thirty-three years ago. Friday night was our date night. Virginia was working two jobs to put me through doctoral studies at St. Michael's College in Toronto. We were virtually hand-to-mouth poor, but on Friday night we splurged. We routinely rendezvoused at our one bedroom apartment at Steeles and Bathurst and then headed to Swiss Chalet for their rotisserie roasted chicken sandwich, the cheapest thing on the menu. After a long hot mid-summer work week we gave ourselves permission to crash.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Message Remix*, p. 527.

We were about to leave —the key was in the door, when the phone rang. I remember looking at Virginia, as if to say, “Do we have to get that?” Her face said without words, “Might as well.” I somewhat begrudgingly got to the phone on the fourth ring.

“Where have you been? I have been trying to get you all week!” The recognizable voice on the other end was our social worker Ms. Cadbury, a sixty-something, grand-motherly type who wore bobby-socks and worked for the Toronto Children’s Aid Society. She had endeared herself to us during the official home-study when she described our hall closet, where we planned to remove the door and squeeze in a crib, as a cute baby alcove. We knew then that she was on our side.

On the phone Ms Cadbury sounded a bit provoked and a little frantic. This was before the ubiquitous cell phone and through the week we were hardly ever home. “This was the last time I was going to call you before moving on to the next name on my list,” she said, adding, “I have a baby for you.” If we had known that we were anywhere near to the next on the list, we would have missed work and sat by the phone impatiently waiting. We had no idea we were even close. We had purposely determined not to get too excited, because the adoption agency had said it could take another six months. I must have said, “Sorry,” but I’m not sure. I was stunned. Staccato thoughts raced through my mind. A Baby. Our Baby. Last call. Move on to the next on the list. I was suddenly bombarded by simple monosyllables. Realty had shifted under my feet. How could such complexity be described with so few words and such simple words at that.

Before I could say another word, she said, “You can pick up your son tomorrow at Women’s College Hospital. Congratulations.” She explained where and when to meet her at the hospital. She repeated her congratulations and said goodbye. It was probably her last order of business for the day. She could go home now. I hung up the phone. How does one tell his wife, who is waiting by the door, tired and hungry for a Swiss Chalet chicken sandwich, that life has just forever changed, that the earth’s orbit froze for a moment. How do you say, “Our three-day old baby boy is downtown and can be picked up in the morning?” In three minutes, five minutes max, from the time the key was in the door to the phone call, followed by my halting explanation, we both sat down stunned. Incredibly excited, grateful, and totally nervous all at the same time.

That night was a blur. I think I was in shock. I know we headed to Sears and spent ninety dollars on a crib mattress and a baby outfit to bring our son home from the hospital. We had purposely not filled the apartment with baby things so as not to get too excited too soon. But now we were playing catch up. Neither of us slept much that night. We got on the phone and got our family equally excited, but not nearly as nervous. We were far from family and very much on our own. We may have been the most unprepared naive parents on the face of the earth, at least that’s how I felt.

By the time Andrew came along, a year and a half later, we were veterans. Andrew arrived earlier than we had anticipated as well, but by now we were prepared. He was born in Ottawa and delivered to our apartment by a Christian couple. I remember them handing him over to us. The moment is forever itched in my memory. It was a sacred moment. He was dressed in yellow and white and his face wore a contented grin. He is thirty-one now and he risks his life as an ocean life-guard in Dominical, Costa Rica, but he still wears that beautiful, contented grin, I first saw when he was a week old. Our third child, Kennerly, arrived at the end of nine months of splendid anticipation. Surprise. Surprise! She was the one who proved that we had been real parents all along. Adoption and conception are different but it makes no difference in the heart of the parent. Either way parents hold their children in their heart.

By the time the third child arrives, parents are pretty relaxed about the whole thing, but with our first child we were anything but relaxed. That almost missed call from Ms. Cadbury still makes me shiver. What if we had ignored the ring, waved it off, turned the key, and headed for dinner? We could have been staring blankly at each other over a chicken sandwich wondering if and when the adoption agency would give us a call. I say that, because our conversation often turned to adoption and children after an exhausting week of study and work. To think that we almost missed our future is still un-nerving to me. Ms. Cadbury meant it when she said that was her last try before moving down the list. We came perilously close to losing our firstborn son. Our son could have gone to another family. Of course, then he would not have been our firstborn son. As it turned out all of three of our children are firstborn, which is how I think the sons and daughters of God are privileged in the Gospel of the Kingdom.

At the appointed time, we arrived at the hospital, found the unit and signed in. Frankly, I don't remember anything else, except that we were ushered into a small room with a very large Jamaican-born nurse hovering over a baby who was wailing and flailing with all his might. She was changing his diaper and he was protesting with every single cell of his tiny little body. His whole body was red with anger. He was one unhappy camper, but his screaming subsided when he was changed and wrapped in a blanket and Virginia took him in her arms. His biological mother gave him the name Adam, a kind of placeholder until we could give him his real name. She named him well. He is after all, like us, a son of Adam. But we named him Jeremiah, believing that what the Lord said to the ancient prophet was true of our newborn son, "before I formed you in the womb I knew you."

Were we lucky? A few minutes later and we would have missed our social worker's call. She said it was her last try. She was about to call the next person on her list. Is Jeremiah our son because of a lucky turn of fate? Or, does Divine Love prevail in spite of and in the midst of the vicissitudes of random circumstances and just-in-time phone calls. The apostle Paul's confidence in our Heavenly Father makes sense to me: "In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ. . ." The language is truly breath-taking. Life is not a matter of lucky breaks. Life is by Divine design. My very own family is a redemptive analogy for my relationship to Christ - for our relationship to Christ. "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight." Amen.

God's covenant love frames the Book of Proverbs. The fear-of-the-Lord shapes every aspect of life. Eugene Peterson calls it "the stock biblical phrase for the way of life that is lived responsively and appropriately before who God is, who he is as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Old Testament theologian Bruce Waltke claims it is "the quintessential rubric, which expresses in a nutshell the basic grammar that holds the covenant community together."² Grammarians call the fear-of-the-Lord a bound phrase. We should think of it as one word rather than four. "Fear" in this phrase does not refer to a feeling of apprehension or insecurity or dread, but just the opposite, reverence, respect, awe, trust, and confidence. All that is positive about this word "fear" comes because of its relationship to the Lord.

Broadway Plays and Biblical Proverbs

"Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts." James 3:13, The Message

² Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays In Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 42.

Broadway presents an alternative universe, one that we can escape to and get lost in. The visual spectacle of *The Lion King* energizes storytelling. Elton John's anthems praise the cosmic circle of life. We feel like embracing the cycles of life and death, rebirth and metamorphosis, as our own personal worldview whether we agree or not. The production's visual and sound majesty overrides any philosophical nihilism that might creep in. We are so enthralled by the show that we'll settle for new age platitudes.



"Mamma Mia!" has a sweet way of manipulating the tragedy of immorality. A 20-year-old who is about to get married, secretly reads her mother's diary and discovers that there are three men who could be her father. In real life, this wouldn't be a light-hearted comedy. It would be a tragedy. But somehow it is all very fun and funny.

Broadway's "Wicked" resolves teenage angst by turning things around, good is evil and evil is good. You never really know which is which. Good is soul-less, spoiled, and empty. Evil is gritty and real. You don't have to feel inferior. Just be yourself.



A musical-comedy-style renders all beliefs ridiculous, including Jesus. "The Book of Mormon" mocks more than the teachings of the Mormon Church. In this venue everything looks "valiant, glorious, and absurd." Ben Brantley of the New York Times writes, the "religion of the musical gives ecstatic shape to a world that often feels overwhelmingly formless."

"Once" accepts loneliness as an existential given. Bitter sweet romantic resignation colors life. Heartache is a constant. "I don't know you, but I want you all the more for that . . . Take this sinking boat and point it home" (Falling Slowly).

Broadway explores the fallen human condition with the full range of human talent, but it does so more as an escape or a distraction from real life. If there is an overriding truth, and no one claims there is, it is that there is no meta-narrative, no true-Truth. Everything is simply a matter of opinion. Philosophy calls this nihilism. Critics call it entertainment. The Bible explores the fallen human condition as well, but always in the light of God's redemptive provision.



"Nothing is so beautiful," writes Simone Weil the French philosopher and Christian mystic, "nothing is so continually fresh and surprising, so full of sweet and perpetual ecstasy, as the good; no desert is so dreary, monotonous, and boring as evil. But with fantasy, it is the other way around. Fictional good is boring and flat, while fictional evil is varied, intriguing, attractive, and full of charm."

Vivid biblical word pictures help us visualize the truth of God. Proverbs 31 is a classic example of truth *pictured* rather than lectured. Wisdom is described in real world earth tones rather defined in idealistic platitudes. To hear the Word of God in Proverbs 31 is to let the portrait of a wise woman shape and color our perspective on wisdom. It is not a still life portrait, but a series of action pictures that captures both the essence and the multi-faceted nature of wisdom. Instead of being given a list of ideas, we are invited to picture a life of

faithfulness, fellowship and fidelity. Like a beautiful painting it deserves our careful attention and our appreciation for the artist's medium and cultural period. Anyone can judge a painting according to their biases and prejudices, but it often takes careful work to discover and appreciate the real beauty of a work of art. The woman pictured in Proverbs 31 lives well, lives wisely, lives humbly. Her portrait was meant to inspire wisdom, not envy, and help both women and men picture what the "fear of the Lord" looks like in daily life. Proverbs 31 is a narcissistic resistant picture of a life shaped by the fear-of-the-Lord.

There are several key insights which help in understanding this important picture of wisdom in *Proverbs*. It is helpful to discern several significant differences: (1) the difference between the fear of the Lord and the fear of what other people think of us; (2) the difference between biblical perfection and cultural perfection; and (3) the difference between true heartfelt praise and half-hearted appreciation.

Two Types of Fear

Of all the ways the book of Proverbs might have ended it is significant that it ends with a life picture of a woman. The theme of the book is all about wisdom; real world, down-to-earth, everyday wisdom. Chapter one begins with a word picture. The "plain daylight of wisdom" is refracted "into its rainbow of constituent colors" (Kidner). Wisdom is devotion to the truth and the discernment of right and wrong. It is discretion, discipline, and diligence. Wisdom involves giving and receiving direction and guidance. It's not about being smart or brilliant or having a high I.Q. It's about having insight and understanding. It's about learning to listen and listening to learn. The starting point and bottom line for this full-orbed, multi-faceted, personally engaging wisdom is this: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline" (1:7). As Proverbs continues wisdom is applied in every conceivable area of life from speech to sex and from sloth to success. There is virtually nothing in life that doesn't call for wisdom. It ranges from common sense to Creation's core value. When wisdom is personified in Proverbs, the feminine voice is used. Wisdom raises her voice and she cries out at the city gates (8:1-11). In a description that makes us think of Christ himself, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:3), we are told that wisdom was from the beginning (8:22f).

All that is said about wisdom, from the word picture to the Christ picture, only makes the life picture at the end all the more significant. We might have anticipated some sage advice or a special description of the king as a fitting model for wisdom, but instead, we see a woman whose whole life is compellingly shaped by the fear of the Lord. This portrait is not a fragment attached to the end, simply because it doesn't fit anywhere else. On the contrary, it is the writer's climax. It is the closing illustration that brings the message of home. By the time you get to the end of Proverbs we're asking, "What does wisdom look like?" And the writer shows us. I can't imagine a stronger way of honoring women than using a woman to capture the essence of wisdom and the fear of the Lord. The conclusion of Proverbs is a resounding affirmation of the significance of the *wisdom* of women who honor God.

The confidence and competence that this woman exudes is derived from her fear of the Lord. Her sense of awe and reverence for God overcomes her fears of inferiority, intimidation, self-doubt and timidity. By fearing the Lord she is not fearful of her husband or frustrated by changing circumstances or frightened by the future. Through dependence and devotion to God she gains an essential perspective for dealing with life. The fear of the Lord opposes the fear of what others think of us. It shrinks the fears that confine us to the small world of other people's expectations. As we respond to God in reverence and awe, we react less and less to the pressures that intimidate and belittle us.

The fear of the Lord has enlarged this person's world. She is free to enjoy and contribute to her family. She shows compassion to the poor and cares for those who work under her authority. She is creative, energetic, and wise. She and her husband work as a team. She manages the household, invests in real estate, and plans ahead. The fear of the Lord has liberated this woman in ways the modern woman envies. Her life is full and her world is whole, because her character is rooted in the wisdom of God.

Two Forms of Perfection

When our children were growing up, we joked that the one thing they wouldn't say is that they wished their dad had spent more time with them. They might have felt that I was in their lives too much. Among other things, the rhythm of our evening dinner and devotions together established my presence in their lives. I was never into hobbies, but that did not inhibit our three from embracing flying fishing, horses, soccer, surfing, tennis, snow boarding, poetry, and music.

I tried to put them to work. There was the time I was teaching the boys how to cut the grass in Bloomington, Indiana. I was lecturing them how to keep the blower on the rotary power-mower pointed away from the house, especially when they were cutting near the basement walk-out glass door. I cranked up the mower to give them a demonstration. I turned the blower away from the glass door and started to mow. Before I had gone six feet, the mower picked up a small rock and propelled it into the plate glass door. The glass did not shatter quickly, it cracked slowly. Starting in the corner, it rippled and crackled, until the whole door was a mass of broken glass. I was stunned. The boys momentary shock quickly turned into gales of laughter. They were laughing so hard they were rolling in the grass. They were laughing so hard, I started laughing.

It is helpful to distinguish between cultural and biblical perfection. The wisdom personified in *Proverbs 31* is a person of noble character, who fears the Lord and is clothed with strength and dignity. She defies a cultural image of perfection. The writer, Kathleen Norris, observes that perfectionism is "a serious psychological affliction that makes people too timid to take necessary risks and causes them to suffer when, although they've done the best they can, their efforts fall short of some imaginary, and usually unattainable, standard." Perfectionism is not a compliment, but a disorder. It describes those who have reduced life to a compulsive self-preoccupied performance. Perfectionism flattens life out and makes birthday parties as important as feeding the hungry.

This is not the perfection that Jesus had in mind in the Sermon on the Mount, when he admonished, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). Nor is it true to the apostle Paul's understanding when he wrote, "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ" (Col 1:28). The biblical understanding of perfection involves growth and maturity. It has to do with holiness and righteousness. As Kathleen Norris writes, "To 'be perfect,' in the sense that Jesus means it, is to make room for growth, for the changes that bring us to maturity, to ripeness. To mature is to lose adolescent self-consciousness so as to be able to make a gift of oneself, as a parent, as teacher, friend, spouse" (p.56). The difference between cultural and biblical perfection is the difference between cosmetics and character, etiquette and ethics, interior decorating and heart-felt devotion. It is the difference between cut-flowers and the tree of righteousness. One form of perfection is preoccupied with the latest fashions or adventures and the other is concerned with enduring faithfulness. That is not to say that the woman in Proverbs 31 is all substance and no style. There is ample evidence that this woman knows how to dress with style and has an eye for beauty, but appearances do not rule her life. She is a person of character and maturity, who seeks first things first.

Cultural perfectionism triggers envy, but biblical perfection inspires growth. There is a difference between

envying someone and aspiring to be like them. If we take a careful look at the woman or man of noble character we see a person who we would like to have as a friend or a mentor. Her example raises us up rather puts us down. We are encouraged by her, rather than intimidated by her. If people of maturity and character provoke resentment and anger within us, the problem lies not with them, but within us. I suppose someone reading *Proverbs 31* could envy this woman for her happy marriage, respectful children, profitable business and energetic creativity, or they could learn from her. Such a choice lies with us and distinguishes wisdom from foolishness.

Two Kinds of Recognition

Some people spend considerable energy trying to win the favor of people in general, rather than the people they know. Fame is name recognition by the nameless masses, but family is knowing you are loved by those closest to you. For some people it is far more important to be popular than to be loved. They confuse these two and see popularity as a substitute for intimacy. Some women and some men long for public recognition, because of their broken personal relationships. They compete for people's approval, because they are not secure in their family's love. They have not learned the difference between fearing God and fearing what other people think; they have not distinguished between biblical and cultural perfection; nor have they understood that cultivating noble character is not the same as doing noble things.

There is a huge difference between heart-felt praise and half-hearted appreciation. Obviously, the difference cannot be measured in flowery words or expensive gifts. I love the way this woman is praised and honored. "Her children arise and call her blessed." I love it, because I can see it. I can picture the scene. The family is gathered and a daughter, speaking from her heart, and without embarrassment, affirms her mother with the dignity and devotion she deserves. A son stands and speaks up for her because he is proud of her. They acknowledge her wisdom, creativity, energy, and love, not with superlatives, but with a single God-centric word. They call her blessed. Her life is an expression of God's work, God's love, God's blessing. She is defined not by what she has achieved, but by what she has received from the hand of God. This affirmation means more than all the flowers and diamonds in the world. Yes! It really does.

Her husband also, praises her. He's a discerning man. He values the "right stuff." He draws a comparison that puts his finger right on the key difference: "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all." The difference is between a woman of noble character, who fears the Lord, and a woman who does nice things. There really is no comparison is there? The measure of a woman is not an itemized list of the things she does, but who she is. Here is a woman who ages with grace and becomes more, not less, over time. She may have "one foot already in eternity, regarding the time, the date, and even the year as being of little consequence" (Norris, p.57). Her beauty is not skin deep, but from the soul, impacting everything she does. She is neither the self-made independent modern woman, nor the small-minded male-dominated housewife. To praise her is to praise her Lord. Everything she has comes from the Lord, but that in no way distracts from the reward she deserves in and outside the home. "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate" (31:30-31). The conclusion of the book of *Proverbs* opens with a question, "A wife of noble character who can find?" The question could be read in various ways. I don't think it means that such a person is impossible to find. I think it means that when you find such a person realize just how priceless she or he is and accord them the dignity and praise they deserve. *Proverbs* concludes the way it does, so that women and men might be inspired to embrace this model of wisdom.

