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Wisdom in the Capitol

Proverbs 3:13; 4:7

Inscribed upon the walls of our Capitol building are two verses from the book of Proverbs:

Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding.

Proverbs 3:13

Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding.

Proverbs 4:7

Back in 1930-32 when the rotunda section of the building was completed, Cass Gilbert evidently recognized the importance of wisdom for those who would serve in this magnificent structure. The fact that these verses from Proverbs are displayed to those who enter and work in our Capitol building is significant, for it was a government leader (Solomon), writing to his son who would one day be king, who wrote and compiled much of this book about wisdom. Proverbs may actually be looked upon as a textbook on how to be a wise government leader. Proverbs seeks to teach us that every lawmaker, government leader, and every believer can be successful in their lives by dedicating themselves to the acquisition of true wisdom.

Now let's take a closer look at these verses that challenge those who enter and work in our Capitol building to pursue true wisdom in their lives:

"Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding". "Happy" is from a word that means to walk or go straight forward and has the idea of being prosperous and blessed. (It is more often translated "blessed" in the OT.) It has the force of an interjection; "How blessed!" or, "How fortunate!" It carries the same meaning as the NT word "blessed" as found in the Beatitudes of Matthew 5. It is important to note that when this word is used, a person has to **do something**; he has to **take action** to achieve that state of happiness. Here, the one who finds wisdom, and prosperous. Elsewhere, the person who trusts God (Psalm 34:8), obeys God's Word (Psalm 119:2), and, in a negative sense, avoids the ways of the ungodly (Ps. 1:1) will be blessed in their lives.

Each of us will quickly admit that we want to be happy, to be blessed, to be successful and prosperous in our lives. God's Word clearly tells us that in order to find true happiness, one of the key requirements is to find true wisdom!

"Wisdom is the principal thing..." 'Principal' here refers to something that is first, the beginning, the choicest, first, or best of a group. It speaks of that which is necessary and foundational.¹ This is the same word found in Proverbs 1:7¹, a vital passage we will look at later. **"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge..."** This statement lays out for us the fact that true wisdom is the foundation, the prerequisite for a successful life. Its presence on our Capitol building should remind us that wisdom is also the foundation for good government and good government leaders as well!

"...Therefore, get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding." "Get" is a word from the marketplace that means 'to buy' or 'to purchase'. The noun "getting" refers to the treasures, possessions, or wealth that is acquired by purchase. Proverbs 23:23 further clarifies this point, **"Buy the truth, and do not sell it, Also wisdom and instruction and understanding."** Jesus illustrated this truth with the parable found in Mark 13:44.¹ We are exhorted to gain wisdom, but we are informed that it will come only at a price. It is something for which we must work and make sacrifices to acquire. It takes study, discipline, meditation, and commitment to realize true wisdom in our lives. It will cost us to become true disciples of Jesus Christ!

As we have seen, the verses engraved upon our Capitol walls confront us with the importance of gaining true

wisdom. And, if gaining this wisdom is so vital to our lives, it is needful for us to have a good grasp of what true wisdom actually is.

II. DEFINITION OF TRUE WISDOM

Wisdom is one of those words that can be difficult to concisely define and Christian writers explain it many different ways:

DEFINITIONS OF WISDOM

“Wisdom is the practical and successful application of God’s truth to life’s situations.”

“Wisdom is the art of being successful, of forming the correct plan to gain the desired results.

“Wisdom means being skillful and successful in one’s relationships and responsibilities ...Observing and following the Creator’s principles of order in the moral universe.”

It is difficult to succinctly define this word because there is so much meaning packed into it as it is used in the Bible. The word most often used for **wisdom** (Hebrew *chokmah*) has much more meaning than our single English word can express. The word essentially means a high degree of skill in any domain, and the closest English word might be **expertise**. Skilled craftsmen who worked on the construction of the tabernacle were given wisdom from God in the areas of metalworking, stone cutting, and wood working to accomplish that task. (Ex. 31:3-6) Military leaders had wisdom in planning and executing their military campaigns. But in Proverbs in its special sense, it refers to one who is skilled, who has **expertise** in living.

A wise person is one who is skilled in right living, one who is able to choose the right goals in life and use their knowledge and understanding to choose the right means to accomplish them.

In the introductory verses (1:1-5) of Proverbs we find a clear statement of the purpose of the book. In laying out his intent, Solomon uses several words to define, describe, and broaden our understanding of biblical wisdom. These words are used almost synonymously throughout the book, but each gives us a different facet of wisdom and together they give us a powerful picture of what it means to be a truly wise person.

Instruction has to do with correction, whether by a verbal rebuke or a physical punishment. It is from taking heed to such rebuke and discipline that true wisdom is gained in our lives. Proverbs 3:11 prompts us, “My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD...” A wise person is willing to accept rebuke or correction from God’s Word and from others.

Understanding refers to the ability to grasp truth with insight and discernment. A wise person has the ability to discern between right and wrong.

Prudence connotes shrewdness or cunning in developing plans to accomplish one’s goals. A wise person is able to plan how to respond to the challenges of daily life.

Knowledge is used 42 times throughout the book of Proverbs and means “knowledge of truth and indeed of God Himself.”¹ A wise person recognizes the importance of knowing God and His word.

Discretion is closely related to prudence and literally has to do with ‘hidden, private thinking’. A wise person will carefully consider the issues and choices they face each day.

Learning, from a word that means to “grasp” or “seize”, here refers to grasping with the mind. A wise person will strive to increase their knowledge of the word and their understanding of spiritual things.

Counsel comes from a nautical term “rope pulling” and hence, the steering of a ship. It is used figuratively of the guidance and direction we get from God’s Word. A wise person will allow God’s Word and other believers to help direct and guide their lives.

To summarize, true wisdom is the sum total of all these words. It goes far beyond mere intelligence and mental ability. True wisdom is an attitude of the heart that recognizes God’s authority over our lives and submits to that authority on a daily basis.

Each of us needs to dedicate ourselves to pursuing true wisdom. We do this by making a commitment to study God’s Word and make it a part of our daily lives. A great challenge for you as a legislators, government leaders, or staff, is to apply God’s word to the myriad of issues, situations, questions, and temptations you face as you serve here at the Capitol. But the rewards are great, as we are reminded by the words over the Capitol door:

“Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding.”

BIBLE STUDIES

Thursdays, 12:00 Noon

MCMANUS (House) CONFERENCE ROOM

(252-M Located by minority offices near House chamber)