



Who can speak of wisdom? Where is wisdom found? Who can be wise in a foolish world? Do the letters added after one's name, indicating their academic accomplishments, imply wisdom? Do the bags under one's eyes, indicating long days of hard work and thought-filled sleepless nights, imply wisdom? Is it age; is it title; is it one's line of work, that implies wisdom? Do you find wisdom; or does wisdom find you?

In Proverbs 8, wisdom is personified as a beautiful, classy lady looking for a suiter, a partner, a mate among the sons of men. Lady wisdom is looking for someone who desires her. But lady wisdom does not stand alone.

Beside lady wisdom, stands lady foolishness, Ms. Folly. She is a seductress and a temptress. The sons of men are warned about her in chapter 5. She is described with lips that drip honey and smooth words, smoother than oil. But in the end, her words are as bitter as wormwood and as sharp as a sword. She lurks and creeps about in the dark. And her siren call leads to death.

In contrast, lady wisdom, Sophia, does not lurk and crouch about; she stands proud and elegant at the highways and byways of this world. She is in the public square at high noon making her call, her invitation to the sons of men. "Take me," she cries. "I am better than gold, better than silver. My wisdom is better than jewels. My fruit is greater than anything that you desire. All who fail to find me fall down. All who hate me, love death." Her words are goodness, truth and beauty. To love her is to hate pride and despise arrogance. Her call leads to light and life. Who are you taking to prom, Ms. Folly or Lady Wisdom? Who will you pursue, the lusty seductress or the temperate Sophia? The choice would seem obvious. But somehow, it is not that easy.

On the surface, both appear compatible. From the outside, both seem beautiful. From the lips of each, come promises of prosperity and fortune. Both lady wisdom and lady foolishness seem like nice ladies. Is it possible that we could confuse wisdom and folly? Is it possible that we could confuse the fear of the Lord and the desires of the flesh? One looks like the other. One promises just as much as the other. Appearing to be twin sisters, they seem indistinguishable.

But we hear the difference in Proverbs 8. Wisdom came first. In fact, what we are told is that at no point was wisdom not. At no time did wisdom not exist. At God's right hand, stands wisdom; and the wisdom of God has been there since time eternal. Wisdom even claims:

*"at the first, the Lord possessed me. At the first, before the beginning, I was with the Lord. Before the seas were dug; before the mountains were raised; before the trees were planted; before the earth was made and given life, I, Wisdom, was with the Lord."*

Wisdom has always been; and wisdom has always been the delight of God. In chapter 3, wisdom is illustrated as a tree of life – even the tree of life in the garden of Eden. Her fruit gives life. Her shade is good. And all who hold fast to her are called blessed. And so, we hear that even from the engine of creation, wisdom makes her appeal to the sons of men:

*"eat of my fruit and have the wisdom of God."*

But planted next to the tree of wisdom and life, was planted another tree. We hear this other tree's name in Genesis – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Both trees appear good. Both trees boast branches bearing blessings. The serpent even said,

*“you will not die; for God knows that when you eat of its fruit, your eyes will be opened; and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”*

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food... and a delight to the eyes... and that the tree was desired to make one wise... She took the fruit and ate. She gave it to her husband. And he ate. And their eyes were opened. And they fell. The sin of confusing wisdom and folly is about as old as old gets. We could even say, this is the original sin.

Many wisemen have tried explaining this problem between lady wisdom and the sinister sister temptress. The sons of men have always had this problem of discernment. Each explanation more brilliant than the last. Only God and his wisdom can satisfy. To know wisdom, is to know all that is good, true and beautiful. Each century of the church is filled with new and improved wisemen with wise things to say about wisdom and warnings about her copycat. Unsurprisingly, Luther puts the problem rather bluntly, he said “reason is the devil's harlot.” In other words, it is out of our very desire for wisdom that the devil can deceive us and twist that desire into its own idle. Such an idolatry looks like a religion full of reason, but absent the fear of the Lord; a religion full of knowledge, but absent truth; a religion full of understanding, but absent justice.

This is a religion that is inane and anchorless. Constant debates and reinventions of words, but never arriving at the truth. And not for a lack of trying. The truth was never the destination. Foolishness has always been the sole enterprise of such religions. Adherents to such religion are not animated by a desire for what is right, but only a desire to be right. Even as lady wisdom cries out in plain sight, the sons of men pay her no mind as they go about pursuing the imposter and mistress. We have this tendency to ignore her. We have better and greater things to do, or so we cleverly tell ourselves. How many times have we taken the wrong gal to the prom?

A Wiseman once claimed that he came in wisdom, indeed, he became Wisdom Incarnate (that is – Wisdom, in the flesh). He lamented that his people disowned him. And he said to them:

To what then shall I compare the people of this generation? They are like children, sitting in the marketplace calling to one another saying, I played the flute and you did not dance; I played a funeral song and you did not mourn. For my forerunner John the Baptists came eating no bread and drinking no wine and you said he has a demon, but the Son of Man has now come, eating and drinking and you say that he is a glutton and a drunkard and a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Yet wisdom

He says,

is justified by her children

This Wiseman – this Son of Man – he understood wisdom. He delighted in wisdom; and in him was the delight of God. He brought repentance to the tax collector. He preached salvation to the sinner. His delight was making the lame walk, making the blind see, bringing the proud to humility. He became the wisdom of God in the flesh, so that we could make our delight the wisdom of God as well.

But the religious leaders wanted signs. And the philosophers claimed to seek wisdom. But when the Wisdom Incarnate spoke to them, they only heard foolishness. Both were just captive by that same seductress. So, in what appeared to be utter foolishness, this Son of Man, God's Man,

God's Wisdom, he shamed the religious by giving them a sign – the sign of the cross; and he shamed the wise by appearing like a fool – a fool on the cross. In the folly of the crucifixion, all of the glistening achievements of the sons of men lost their glitter and glamor. But in that darkness of death on a cross, the Wisdom of God shined brighter than ever before. All of the wise words from all the wisemen were deafened in the silence of salvation.

The wisdom from Proverbs 8 has been revealed to be the Son of God from John 8. For Christ crucified is, in fact, the creative power and wisdom of God. The cross is the new tree of life. On its branches hang the fruit that gives wisdom, truth and justice to a blind, deaf and dumb world. The body and blood of the Wisdom Incarnate grants us life and salvation.

Lady wisdom still beckons us to join her in the banquet feast, the heavenly prom. She offers to teach us what is goodness, truth and beauty. And for us, who have been found by this wisdom and reborn – baptized – into his image, he has become our source of life, our salvation (and yes) our wisdom. The cross puts things in their proper place. At the foot of the cross, you know truth from lie. You know blessing from curse. You know the elegant lady wisdom from the evil seductress. At the cross, you know wisdom from folly.

Amen