

Lecture IV
on
Proverbs 1:20-33

by
Ralph Wardlaw

***"Wisdom cries without; she utters her voice in the streets. She cries in the chief place of concourse, in the openings of the gates, in the city she utters her words, saying, How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scorers delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge? Turn you at my reproof; behold, I will pour out my Spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you. Because I have called, and ye refused, I have stretched out my hand and no man regarded, but ye have set at naught all my counsel and would none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear comes, when your fear comes as desolation and your destruction comes as a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me. For that they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, they would none of my counsel, they despised all my reproof; therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way and be filled with their own devices. For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them. But whoso hearkens unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil."* Proverbs 1:20-33**

It has been a question with expositors whether by WISDOM, in this and subsequent passages, we are to understand a person under this designation, namely, the second Person of the adorable Trinity--"the Word" and "Wisdom of God," the medium of divine communications to men, the "Light of the world"--or simply the instruction of the word of God personified as Wisdom, speaking to the children of men.

It is enough for the present to observe (what every sincere believer in the inspiration of the Bible will at once admit) that in this passage the address is *divine*.¹ The voice of WISDOM is the voice of God. The authority of WISDOM is the authority of God. The invitations and the warnings of WISDOM are the invitations and the warnings of God. The neglect and scorn of WISDOM are the neglect and scorn of God. The blessing of WISDOM is the blessing of God; and the vengeance of WISDOM is the vengeance of God. If it is a personification of *instruction*, it is not of human but divine instruction; it is not of instruction as coming from the wisdom of Solomon, but from the wisdom of God. And surely when the wisdom of God speaks, it is the wisdom of man to hear and obey. Indifference and scorn are impiety, infatuation [foolish or extravagant passion], madness.

Divine Instruction addressed men of old by the Prophets. Those "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21), in the name of Jehovah, "warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom" (Col. 1:28.) They informed, they invited, they reproved, they promised, they threatened--all in the same name, all with the same authority. There was the solemnity and the weight of Heaven's truth in every word they uttered. But "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds" (Heb. 1:1, 2). Following his Son are his inspired "ambassadors," to whom he committed "the word of reconciliation," and who had in all things, whether regarding truth or duty, the "mind of Christ." Since the time when the "vision and the prophecy were sealed" in Patmos, there have been no new revelations and no inspired teachers. Yet all the servants of God still who "speak according to this word" (and it is very obvious that no others *can be* his servants), may be regarded as speaking with the voice of heavenly wisdom and (however unworthy of notice or of deference in themselves) demanding audience for their message, as accredited by the Book from which they

¹ For the discussion of the point, see Lect. on ch. 8:1-21.

profess to take their instructions.

There are two things to be marked as characterizing the address of Wisdom. The first is *publicity* (verses 20, 21). "Wisdom cries without; she utters her voice in the streets. She cries in the chief place of concourse, in the openings of the gates, in the city she utters her words."

She thus chooses the most suitable places for giving her instructions all the publicity possible. Now this has been and still may be, by the servants of God, done literally. Jesus himself set the example. He uttered his voice in the synagogues, in the courts of the temple, in the streets, in the fields, on mountains, and in plains--wherever human beings could be assembled to listen. Pursuing during his official life the great ends of his ministry as "a teacher come from God," he acted as the occasions of that ministry required, seizing on every opportunity of proclaiming truth and publishing the doctrines and admonitions of the Father that sent him. And what the Master did, the servants need not surely be ashamed to do.

Street and field preaching have, in many cases, been signally owned and honored of God for the great end of all preaching--the bringing of sinners to Christ, the turning of the disobedient unto the wisdom of the just. It [street and field preaching] has sometimes been brought into disrepute by the conduct of inferior, unworthy, and mercenary characters; but there [i.e., the *existence* of those who bring street and field preaching into disrepute] is the greater reason why it [street and field preaching] should be redeemed from obloquy [censure] by the countenance of right-principled and right-hearted men--men who can truly say, "We seek not *yours* but *you*." If there is a portion of the world's scorn, and even of the so-called *christian* world's scorn still attached to it, what is that compared with saving souls from death? But the general idea of *publicity* [is] universal publicity. [It] is that [universality] which is intended to be conveyed; just [the same] as when our Lord says, "What ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the house-tops" (Matt. 10:27). [In other words] he simply means, "Make it known openly and everywhere."

The second thing in the address of Wisdom is *affectionate earnestness*. The very publicity of her instructions proves her earnestness. She does not wait in private till men may find her out and come to her for her lessons. She goes out to them. She not only embraces opportunities when they present themselves, [but] she seeks them, she makes them. This must ever be the spirit and practice of Christians. The principle of regulating the supply by the demand will never do in their department. The spirit of Christianity must be the spirit of kind aggression. It must seek men out, to tell them of the way of life. It must find its way to the abodes of those who would never themselves come to the house of God to hear of the things that "belong unto their peace." It must carry the tidings of mercy to the most distant and sequestered spots of our country, and make "the dwellers in the mountains and the vales" hear its voice. It must carry it "far hence unto the Heathen," bearing thither "the unsearchable riches of Christ,"--the treasures of that wisdom which "cannot be gotten for gold, nor can silver be weighed for the price thereof." It must thus show itself *in earnest* for the conversion of sinners and the evangelization of the world. And in the earnestness of Wisdom there is *affection*, dictating all the force and tenderness of persuasive expostulation and entreaty.

Such was the example of the "great Teacher," of his prophets before him and of his apostles after him. Theirs was not the style of cold, dry, formal, didactic statement, but the urgency of persuasion, the force of evidence, the exhibition and recommendation of their lessons by motives addressed to all the hopes and fears and longings of the human soul.² The language in the passage before us is full of such tender and urgent sollicitation (verses 22, 23)--"How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scorers delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge? Turn you at my reproof; behold, I will pour out my Spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you."

There are three descriptions of characters here addressed; kindred characters, it is true, in their

² Luke 13:34; Mat. 11:28-30; 2 Cor. 5:20.

generic principles, but different in the mode and measure of the development of those principles.

[1] "*Simple ones*" are evidently (as explained in Lecture two) the ignorant, thoughtless, inconsiderate who lightly (regardless of admonition) "pass on and are punished." "How long," it is said to such, "will ye *love simplicity*?"--choose, that is, to persist in thoughtless levity and dissipation, loving ease and not liking to be disturbed and troubled in their course of carelessness; disinclined to give heed to anything that would at all interfere with the tranquility or the indulgence of the passing hour. The solemn import of the question, as intimating the duty and the necessity of immediate compliance with wisdom's counsels, will appear from what comes after.

[2] "*Scorners*" go beyond the "simple ones." They are not merely indifferent and regardless, they scoff at the things of God. They ridicule or revile his lessons. They sneer at and mock his servants and people. They make his word their jest-book and his day their holiday. They disdain alike the restraints of his precepts and the encouragements of his promises. They laugh at his threatenings, make sport of his terrors, and glory in their superiority to vulgar and superstitious fancies. To them, in the same style of faithful and affectionate expostulation, it is said, "How long will you delight in scorning?" In so doing they took pleasure in what they should have hated. They made light of what ought to have made them serious. They gloried in their shame. They acted in opposition to all the plainest dictates of prudence. They were like "maniacs dancing in their chains." Their very delight and merriment were appalling. They joyed in what made all who loved them sorrowful. They courted death. They sported on the verge of hell.

[3] "*Fools*" who "*hate knowledge*" may describe still another class. [They are] those who are not ignorant of divine lessons--the lessons of truth and of duty (to whom they have been imparted and on whom they have been inculcated by parental tuition, and during their attendance with their parents in the house of God). But they have felt all this a restraint. It has been utterly distasteful to them, irksome to their inclinations and troublesome to their consciences. Determined on following their own ways--"walking after the sight of their eyes and the imagination of their hearts"--they have hated the knowledge which has interfered with and thwarted their purposes, or made them unhappy in the prosecution of them. The career which such pursue is a career of sin against light, in opposition to the convictions of their judgments and the dictates and remonstrances of the inward monitor.³

All these are here addressed in the terms of heartfelt compassion and solicitude. The question is that of serious expostulation: "How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scorners delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge?" It is the address of one who clearly saw in the conduct of all the three (in whatever diversity of measure) *folly*, and *guilt*, and *danger*. They were all acting unwisely, criminally, recklessly. The longer they persisted, the deeper was their guilt becoming and the more imminent their danger. While they were thus "loving simplicity," "delighting in scorning," [and] "hating knowledge," the moment might be at hand that should arrest their career and consign them to the woe from which there is no redemption! "How long" will ye act thus? How long thus "forsake your own mercies?" How long thus provoke the slumbering vengeance of divine Justice? How long thus disregard or brave all that is fearful, and refuse and set at naught all that is exalted in honor and rich in happiness?

The spirit of the address appears in the *exhortation* and the *encouragement* which are immediately added. The *exhortation* is, "Turn you at my reproof." The reproof was that of affectionate faithfulness, and the exhortation shows the temper of the reprover as that of love: "*Turn you*"--to God, to truth, to holiness, to happiness. And we see from what follows that the *motive* is a regard to their own well-being, urged upon them by the compassion of an all-merciful God, as when he says, "Turn ye, turn ye, for why will ye die?" (Ez. 33:11)

3 Comp. John 3:19-21.

It is a call to repentance, not to mere indolent regret--a repentance that needs "to be repented of," the selfish sorrow of the world which "works death"; which for the moment admits the justness of the remonstrance but still loves its old ways; and carelessly alleging it is too late to think of changing now, resolves on going on as before. But [it is a call] to a change of mind respecting their modes of thinking and living, feeling and acting, with the manifestation of the sincerity of both by a decided turning to God and to the ways of faith and obedience.

And the most immediate and ample encouragement is held out to compliance. Every conceivable objection is anticipated. There is no obstacle in the way. God stands with outstretched arms waiting to receive them. And if they speak of their deficiencies, their own ignorance, their own weakness, their own inability, He takes every excuse out of their mouths and silences all by the assurance, "*Behold, I will pour out my Spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you.*"

The two things here mentioned are to be taken in connection with each other. The latter is the result of the former, the former in order to the latter. There can be no plea, therefore, for continued ignorance. The word of God is in possession, and the Spirit of God is in promise. What more can be required? What sinners are called to do is to come to God's word and to ask God's Spirit to enlighten them by means of it. Is there anything unreasonable and hard in this? If *unwilling* to do this, are they not to blame? Nothing--nothing but unwillingness prevents them. God is all encouragement to them. It is not he that keeps aloof from them, but they that keep aloof from him. He offers instruction, but they will not have it. He promises his Spirit, but they will not so much as ask it. All the consequences lie with themselves. The promise here is, "I will not only make my words enter your ears, but will open your understandings to a discernment of their truth, and excellence, and suitableness, and glory; and will open your hearts to their gladdening and saving power."

This is just what the natural man needs: "The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). The inability to know them in their real spiritual excellence arises from no want [lack] of natural power of intellect, but from the blinding, perverting influence of a depraved heart and a vitiated will. And the Spirit of God "makes known God's word" unto the sinner, not in the mere meaning of its terms but in the glory and worth of its great truths, their adaptation to His own character, and to the exigencies [needs] of the fallen creature for whose salvation they are designed.

These are "exceeding great and precious promises." If sinners are not sensible of their value and are not induced by them to comply with the invitation which they are given to recommend and enforce, surely the fault is not His by whom they are made--made in sincerity and kindness.

Such is the divine INVITATION. There is then a solemn interval or pause. Wisdom waits to see the result, to witness the reception it meets with from those to whom it is addressed. Alas! alas! Her hearers "make light of it." They go away, "one to his farm and another to his merchandise,"--each to his worldly and sinful pursuits. The simple ones still love simplicity. The scorers still delight in their scorning. The fools still hate knowledge. They persist in "going astray." Then Wisdom, with awful majesty, proclaims: "Because I have called, and ye refused, I have stretched out my hand and no man regarded, but ye have set at naught all my counsel and would none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear comes, when your fear comes as desolation and your destruction comes as a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you" (1:24-27).

The season of forbearance is gone. The time of expostulation, and warning, and entreaty could not always last. The voice of invitation is exchanged for the voice of judgment. The God of mercy having waited, and in many instances waited long, to be gracious in the exercise of his "goodness and forbearance and long-suffering,"--the God of righteousness summons to his bar and pronounces sentence. The sentence is from the throne of justice against those who refused, when invited, to come to the throne of grace. The description is in harmony with what goes before. The appeal to

themselves as to the past is founded in truth. Wisdom appears in it tender, urgent, importunate calling, and continuing to call even when sinners refuse; "stretching forth her hands, and all day long stretching them forth to a disobedient and gainsaying people." Her language had been, "Ho, everyone that thirsts, come ye to the waters; and he that has no money, come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which satisfies not? Hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David" (Isa. 55:1-3).

Importunate repetition had been employed, and she had tried it in every possible form--of tenderness and of terror; of drawing with the cords of love, and of awakening by salutary alarm; of "counsel" and of "reproof." But all had been in vain. The heart would neither break nor melt. The ear was closed alike to the voice of mercy and of judgment, of persuasion and of threatening. Then comes the terrific CLOSE: "I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear comes, when your fear comes as desolation and your destruction comes as a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you." This is indeed dreadful! Calamity, fear, desolation, whirlwind, destruction; and NO REFUGE! "No ear to pity, no hand to help!" The only ear to which they could appeal--finally closed. The only hand that had power to save--inflicting the ruin! They prospered in sin. They forgot providence. They laughed at the forewarning of danger, and banished from their hearts and from before their eyes "the fear of the Lord." But now their day of grace is ended. Their "judgment lingers not, their damnation slumbers not." "Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man sows that shall he also reap." "He that sows the wind shall reap the whirlwind."

Here it is, the whirlwind of divine wrath--the impetuous, sweeping, desolating storm driving all before it, scattering all their hopes like chaff and stubble; annihilating everything from which they had looked for happiness, and overwhelming themselves in irretrievable ruin, even [in the same way] as the hurricane and the flood carry devastation and overthrow along the cultured fields, laying prostrate the habitations of men and the replenished stores of wealth, and leave the wretched proprietors houseless and penniless, to poverty and starvation. . . . *Such* destitution may well warrant the employment of the strongest terms to express the woe occasioned by it--"*distress and anguish*." O, who can form any imagination of the agony of a soul that feels itself lost, and has at the same moment the deep and sure conviction that the loss is irretrievable, all opportunities of escape gone--gone forever! What a change from the proud derision of the scorner and the thoughtless dissipation of the simple!

And the bitterest ingredient of their cup, the most envenomed sting of the anguish yet remains. The God whom they have despised, to whom they said "Depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways," will disregard their sufferings and their terrors. "I also will laugh at your calamity. I will mock when your fear comes." These are terms of awful import. If sinners feel the thought rising within them that such expressions present a harsh and repulsive view of God, a view of him very unlike a Being who says of himself that he "delights in mercy," [then] I ask them, "What would they have?" God *does* delight in mercy. Is it no sufficient evidence of this that he spares them, and warns them, and invites them, and beseeches them, and stretches out his arms and opens his heart to them, and importunes them to come to him, and assures them--adding his oath to his word--that he "will in nowise cast them out?" Is it not enough that in order to make way for them to his favor, and to form a ground on which he may receive them to the arms of his love, [that] he "has not spared his own Son" but given him up to humiliation and expiatory tears and woes and death for them? Are these things not enough? But [no,] they must be allowed also, as a proof of his mercy, to break his laws, scorn his invitations, brave his judgments, and, insulting the agonies of a bleeding and dying Saviour, reject with disdain the grace and pardon that are offered them in his name.

If they will not be satisfied that God is merciful unless they are permitted to do all this and more with impunity, [then] woe unto them! We can give them no countenance and no encouragement in such

a posture of mind without compromising the glory of God and sacrificing the insulted majesty of Heaven to the misconceptions, the pride, the passion of a worm of the dust! The government of God must be maintained. And impenitent sinners forget that mercy to the *individual* [in the form of salvation to those who come to God] might be the very reverse of mercy to *the great community of the intelligent creation* [in the form of a warning of the consequences of sin to mankind in general]. They [impenitent sinners] require to be assured that the time is coming when, as *they* disregarded God's voice, He will disregard *theirs*. The address in these verses is *to them*, and it amounts to "Where is now your bravado courage? Where now your haughty scorning? Where now your foolhardy confidence? Where now your impious and incredulous taunts and jests, when, 'walking after your own lusts' you scoffed at my people, and turned to ridicule both their hopes for themselves and their fears for you?"

In what follows there is a remarkable change in the person, and it is singularly impressive. Ceasing her address *to them*, "Wisdom turns to *us*, and speaks *of* them, pointing to their awful end and converting it into a warning to others to beware of encouraging it (verses 28-31): "Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me. For that they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, they would none of my counsel, they despised all my reproof; therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way and be filled with their own devices."

Such a scene as that here depicted is sometimes witnessed on a dying bed--the heart unsubdued, remaining in all its stubborn alienation; but the conscience awakened and speaking to the agitated and foreboding spirit "terrible things in righteousness," and the wretched sinner crying to God not as the object of love or of hope, but of mere terror, feeling his irresistible superiority, his "arrows" already "sticking fast within him," and "the poison of them drinking up his spirit." Yet God [is] still hated, his vengeance only dreaded, all within hard as the nether millstone, abandoned to judicial obduracy; and hell opening to the vision of the conscience-stricken and terrified culprit! My friends, there is not to be seen under heaven a scene more horrible than such a deathbed!

But perhaps "the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God" may itself be more especially intended, which will produce a striking correspondence between this passage and several in the New Testament. (See, for instance, Luke 13:23-28 and Matt. 25:10-12.) All cries for mercy will then be too late--all unavailing. The door is shut. The ear of God is shut. The lips of divine Wisdom are shut. There are no more accents of love, no more pressing invitations, no sweet sounds of mercy; no "Ho, everyone that thirsts," no "Come unto me, and I will give you rest," no "Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die?" But [rather there will be] "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire."

Is not the sentence *just*? "Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices." Their miserable end is the fruit, not of God's way but of their own. Had they hearkened to Him, had they obeyed His voice, very different had been the issue. His plan, His device for them was a plan of salvation. It is by "their own devices" they are ruined. Had they, when they might [have], complied with the gracious counsels of Heaven, they should have had "their fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life." And instead of the sentence of banishment and curse, they should still have heard the language of invitation, associated with that of welcome and blessing--"Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you."

Let me impress upon the mind and conscience of everyone the reason, and the *only* reason, of the issue so fearfully described. There is not a word here of *inability*. It is all *unwillingness*. And point me out one passage of the Bible where it is otherwise; where sinners are represented as condemned for *inability*--for not doing what they *could not* do. The blessed God is no such tantalizer. It is never "Ye *could not*," but "ye *would not*." And when at any time inability *is* spoken of, it is inability all of a *moral* nature, and resolves itself into *unwillingness*. And this alone leaves the blameworthiness where it ought to be--not with God but with the sinner. It is of infinite importance thus to justify God.

Every sinner to whom the voice of heavenly Wisdom is addressed, if he perishes, perishes as the consequence of his own unwillingness to hear and obey that voice. Every such sinner who thus perishes, perishes as one who *might* have been saved, and whom nothing whatever kept from salvation but his own want of liking to its nature or to its terms. He *would not*. Every term here is of this description--"would not," "refused," "set at naught," "hated," "did not choose," "despised." "They eat of the fruit of their own way, and are filled with their own devices."

And the same is the doctrine in the language which follows (verse 32): "For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them."

It is the *turning away* from the warnings and invitations of wisdom that slays them. And this turning of the ear from divine instruction and from all that relates to the soul and salvation is many a time the result of this world's prosperity--"*the prosperity of fools shall destroy them*" (Luke 12:16-21). The temptation is represented in Scripture as peculiarly strong, and the representation is in harmony with fact. But *he* is emphatically *a fool* who allows the prosperity of this world to "destroy" him, for "What is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"

How simple, but how beautiful and striking, the contrast (verse 33): "But whosoever hearkens unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil."

He who listens to and complies with the counsels of Wisdom--the believer in divine truth, the CHRISTIAN--shall possess genuine security. "Resting on the Lord," on the wisdom, faithfulness, love, and power of a covenant God and Saviour, his mind will enjoy unmoved tranquility amidst all the turmoils and all the vicissitudes of this life (Phil. 4:6, 7). And, infinitely more than that, he shall be quiet from the fear of ultimate and final evil--the evil of which the wicked and the careless, the "simple ones," the "scorners," and the "fools," become the victims--the terrors of death and hell.

The season of the impenitent sinner's last alarm shall be to him [he who listens and complies with the counsels of Wisdom] the season of peace and hope and joy. He shall stand unappalled in the judgment--"quiet from fear of evil" even at the bar of the Eternal--quiet from the fear of a sentence of condemnation and banishment, such as shall drive away God's enemies. "Accepted in the Beloved" and safe from all evil in virtue of his union to Him, he shall "enter into His joy." And there in the residence of the redeemed no "fear of evil" shall ever find admission. There shall be in the very fullest sense of the words, "quietness and assurance forever."

How delightful the representations of the serene tranquility, the perfect peace and joy of the everlasting habitations: "These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he that sits on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters; and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes" (Rev. 7:14-17).

This is Lecture IV in *Posthumous Works of the Rev. Ralph Wardlaw*, by J. S. Wardlaw, gen. ed., vol. I, *Lectures on the Book of Proverbs*, vol. I, 2nd ed. (London: A. Fullarton & Co., 1869). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.