

THE   
PRESENT  
WORD   
ADULT BIBLE LESSONS

PARTICIPANT'S BOOK

SUMMER 2020

MANY FACES OF WISDOM

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Published in partnership with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, The Moravian Church in America (North and South), the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the United Church of Christ.

*The Present Word* is published quarterly by Geneva Press, 100 Witherspoon St., Louisville, KY 40202-1396.

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Printed in the United States of America

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# PARTICIPANT’S BOOK

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## Introduction

We live in a culture in which information hold sways. Our digital technologies place a vast universe of facts and data at the swipe of a fingertip or the click of a mouse. So much information—and misinformation—is available, in fact, that it is easy to be overwhelmed. Get the facts straight! Check for reliable sources! Don't pass on an intriguing Facebook post unless you fact check it to be sure of its veracity. Knowledge is power, we say. Yet it seems that true wisdom is often in short supply.

Over many centuries, wisdom was woven through the warp of Scripture. Sometimes the threads of wisdom reveal themselves as straightforward pragmatism; at other times wisdom comes in metaphors that glimmer as they seek to illumine. Whether expressed in proverbs or in sayings, in the words and actions of Jesus, or in the words of a letter addressed to Christians living in diaspora communities in the first centuries of the church, wisdom adds an essential element to the pattern of the fabric of God's word.

Over the weeks of this summer quarter, participants will have the opportunity to ponder the things we learned as children, the contrast between the wise and the foolish, the nature of true wealth, the trouble people had understanding Jesus, and finally the call from James that our actions must stand as testimony to our faith. May your encounters with the wisdom God desires for us guide your actions and interactions with family, neighbors, and the wider world.

## The Uniform Series

*The Present Word* quarterly Bible study is based on the Uniform Series, a plan for reading and studying the Bible. The objectives of the series are to help persons increasingly:

1. to know the content of the Bible,
2. to understand the message of the Bible in light of their experiences and relationships, and
3. to be aware of God's self-disclosure, especially God's redeeming love as revealed in Jesus Christ, that they may respond in faith and love—to the end that they may know who they are and what their human situation means, grow as the children of God rooted in the Christian community, live in the Spirit of God in every relationship, fulfill their common discipleship in the world, and abide in the Christian hope.

The emphasis in these objectives is on the Bible as the record of the revelation of God in Christ as the primary source of understanding the meaning of the Christian faith and as the most effective means of confronting persons with the significant concerns of the gospel. These concerns include personal faith, values, human relationships, social responsibility, Christian hope, and the implications of Christian discipleship under the lordship of Christ and in the fellowship of his Spirit.

One of the distinctive features of the Uniform Series is the collaborative process through which denominational partners engage in the common task of developing the Lesson Guides. The development process begins with a Scope and Sequence subcommittee whose work sets a framework for the biblical themes of each six-year cycle. The Scope and Sequence team for Cycle 23 (2016–2022) chose themes that are creatively expressed in this statement of Christian faith:

*The God of the Bible, the source of creation, loves us and calls us in covenant through our faith to worship and to do justice.*

The underlined words in the statement compose the eight recurring themes throughout each quarterly segment of *The Present Word*.

## Quarter in Brief

God is experienced as wisdom in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. During this quarter, we explore the many facets of wisdom as recorded in the Book of Proverbs, in the Gospels, and in the letter written by James.

Unit I, “Wisdom in Proverbs,” in four sessions, explores the nature of God’s wisdom as found in the book of Proverbs. These sessions describe how Wisdom calls to us; the value of Wisdom and the gifts she offers; and ends by exploring the metaphor of the feast of Wisdom.

Unit II, “Wisdom in the Gospels,” offers four sessions, one session from each of the four Gospels that examines the wisdom of God seen in the teachings and life of Jesus.

Unit III, “Faith and Wisdom in James,” offers a five-session study of wisdom as seen in the Letter of James. These sessions explore the interaction of faith and wisdom, including practical advice regarding faith in action and taming the tongue. The study ends by contrasting two kinds of wisdom.

# THE CALL OF WISDOM

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## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Proverbs 1

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Prov. 1:7)

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Most of us grew up hearing proverbs, whether or not we studied the biblical book of Proverbs. The word is a translation of the Hebrew *mashal*, “a saying.” The truisms our elders passed along to us functioned in the same way as this book, which was composed to instruct a young man on the brink of adulthood. A trusted elder took the time to create a collection of things he would need to know, just as our family members and mentors offered truisms to communicate beliefs they believed would prepare us for a righteous life. “Make yourself useful as well as decorative,” says a grandmother urging us to pitch in with the dishes, or “an apple a day keeps the doctor away,” offers an auntie focused on our eating habits.

Jesus, influenced by the Hebrew Scriptures, offered his own wisdom in memorable sound bytes: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21) and “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31). Short sayings may not feel applicable to every situation; when we engage in study of the Scripture, we would be wise to study the meaning of the verses in context as well as examining what arises for us in the reading.

*Gracious God, guide our study of your word. Open our hearts and minds to new understandings as we seek your wisdom, stretching beyond time and place. Amen.*



**SCRIPTURE**

Proverbs 1:1–4, 7–8, 10, 20–22, 32–33

**1:1** The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:  
<sup>2</sup>For learning about wisdom and instruction,  
for understanding words of insight,  
<sup>3</sup>for gaining instruction in wise dealing,  
righteousness, justice, and equity;  
<sup>4</sup>to teach shrewdness to the simple,  
knowledge and prudence to the young—  
.....

<sup>7</sup>The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;  
fools despise wisdom and instruction.  
<sup>8</sup>Hear, my child, your father’s instruction,  
and do not reject your mother’s teaching;  
.....

<sup>10</sup>My child, if sinners entice you,  
do not consent.  
.....

<sup>20</sup>Wisdom cries out in the street;  
in the squares she raises her voice.  
<sup>21</sup>At the busiest corner she cries out;  
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:  
<sup>22</sup>“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?  
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing  
and fools hate knowledge?  
.....

<sup>32</sup>For waywardness kills the simple,  
and the complacency of fools destroys them;  
<sup>33</sup>but those who listen to me will be secure  
and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

**A WORD ABOUT WISDOM**

“**T**op 10 Insights from the Top 10 Blog Posts of the Year” reads the headline on a church leadership blog published a few years ago. While it might sound like secondary self-promotion, the author draws insights from his own work and particularly from reader response to it. Is this wisdom?



A religion scholar receives a grant allowing her time to create a new lectionary focused on biblical stories about women. She invites groups of clergywomen to brainstorm with her, both online and in person, sharing her scholarship and incorporating the suggestions they bring from a pastoral perspective. Is this wisdom?

An intergenerational group gathers for a retreat that begins with the speaker unpacking generational differences of experience and expectations. Anxiety mounts and then tempers flare, but when a good-humored joke is told, the room relaxes and people begin to hear each other across their divides. Is this wisdom?

Wisdom is, first, a concept. It is the idea that there are ways of being, thinking, and doing that transcend the ordinary. Wisdom is something more than knowledge, and it is something more complicated than practical experience. It is rarely gained in a vacuum, yet it is not attained by polling the general population either.

Wisdom is a practice. While some wisdom may seem to come from a flash of inspiration, we attain it by a commitment to going deeper, reaching higher, pondering carefully, and reckoning humbly. It does not come with a guarantee of material wealth or worldly success. Often we gain wisdom through painful experiences of loss, disappointment, or failure.

Wisdom can be intellectual, emotional, or practical. Its expression is not limited to the work of scholars, although we find it in the minds of theologians, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who challenged the attitudes and assumptions of his peers and took on the regime of Hitler. We also find it in the hearts of those who love beyond boundaries, like Saint Teresa of Calcutta, who cared for the sick and the poor. We find it in the actions of those whose grounding is holy, like former president Jimmy Carter, who uses his understanding of divine wisdom coupled with practical skills to create housing through Habitat for Humanity.

Wisdom is transcendent. Perhaps ultimate wisdom can only be found beyond the constraints of mortal life, yet people of faith continue to seek it to guide the choices we make in daily living. Wisdom is a gift from God, but it is not a passive one; we cannot receive it without wanting to have it.

 **What words of wisdom guide you in daily life? Which forms of wisdom speak to you most clearly: intellectual, emotional, or practical?**

## TEACHABLE MOMENTS

In a famous scene from the Disney movie *Bambi*, Thumper is a young rabbit caught making unflattering remarks about Bambi when he is a newborn fawn. When his mother cautions him, he recites the lesson his unseen father has taught him: if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. The book of Proverbs hinges on the idea that your elders will prepare you to live a worthy life. "Hear, my child, your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching," reads chapter 1, verse 8. Are we like Thumper? He hears the teaching, and he clearly listens to it, because he is able to repeat the lesson and embody it. He may be a bunny, but he is teachable. Thumper is no fool.

Many of the first lessons we learn in life are intended to keep us safe. We are warned to look both ways before we cross the street or to wait thirty minutes after eating before we go swimming. Our parents and other elders hope to keep us from harm. We are taught to pay attention to our surroundings and to the instruction being offered by our elders.

As mature people, we may look back and remember the people who influenced us, whether literal parents or people who stood as parents to us. Sunday school teachers, coaches, babysitters, and neighbors may have formed us with the proverbs and sayings they offered along the way. Books and movies planted ideas and truisms in our minds and hearts. Experience and observation play a part as well.

My younger son spent the special occasions of childhood in the company of a slightly older cousin. Both boys were picky eaters. My son tended to be quiet at family events and make do, but his cousin grew more vocal about his preferences and dislikes as adolescence approached. At a birthday party, I provided an organic deli tray with a range of sandwich options, none of which suited the cousin, who called out his displeasure to the gathered family, putting me in an awkward position. After the party, my son spoke to me quietly. "I don't want to be *that guy*," he said. From that day forward, he chose not only to eat more adventurously but to reconsider the impact of his actions on others. His early faith learning influenced him in a teachable moment of realization. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

There is more to wisdom than knowing what is right. Applied wisdom can guide our actions and our interactions with our family, our neighbors, and the wider world.



How has something you learned from a faith leader or elder become applicable in daily life?

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

In the 1800s, the book *Struwwelpeter* contained cautionary stories with gruesome illustrations intended as wisdom for children. If you do not groom yourself, you will be unpopular. If you tease a dog, he could bite you. If you play with matches, you might burn yourself to death! The author of Proverbs offers similar threats of disaster and doom, both in the selected verses we are reading today and in the portions of Proverbs 1 not chosen for this lesson. Threats of harm are a classic teaching tool, as anyone whose parents spanked them will remember, but Baby Boomer and Gen X parents have lived through a change in parenting philosophy that moved away from physical punishment to time-out chairs and “1-2-3 Magic.” Now time-out is passé, and parents are encouraged to reinforce good behavior with affirmation rather than discouraging bad behavior with punishment.

Even so, media directed at adults still employs fear to sway the thinking of its consumers. Newspaper headlines agitate readers; cable news chyrons declare menace; social media posts incite anxiety. How can we make wise decisions about what to believe and do when we are whipped up into a frenzy?

Jonathan Walton, Dean of the Divinity School at Wake Forest University, calls upon Christians to develop a moral framework for living by considering the key influences of Scripture and religious tradition. Look at what Jesus taught, who he spoke to, what kind of stories he told. For Walton, the key to the moral framework is love.<sup>1</sup> Reading Scripture, we might also make the case for a moral framework of peace, justice, or mercy.

Perhaps we can pull through some threads from Proverbs and interlace them with the wisdom of the gospels to build our framework. Wisdom comes from God, who wants to be in relationship with us and teach us. When we have choices to make, things we pray about, we might consider what it would be like to talk out the matter with God and apply the values we have learned in a life of faith to the situation we face. Which choice would please God? Does a potential decision align with the mercy and justice

1. Dr. Walton’s book might be of interest: *A Lens of Love: Reading the Bible in its World for Our World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

the prophets proclaimed as God’s desire? Can we view the outcome through the lens of love and feel it would be wise?

**?** This reading leaves out some verses in Proverbs 1 that further emphasize the punishment of those who do not heed Wisdom’s call. How does the idea of punishment fit with your moral framework and your understanding of God?

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes provide additional information about today’s Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.*

1. “Proverb” is a translation of the Hebrew word *mashal*, which means “a saying.”
2. While the Book of Proverbs begins by ascribing its sayings to Solomon, internal evidence points to it being a collection of wisdom from a variety of individuals, edited and compiled over time.
3. The prologue to the Book of Proverbs clearly indicates the collection’s intended audience: inexperienced young men about to enter adulthood.
4. Proverbs 1:7 is considered the motto for the entire collection and firmly connects human wisdom and knowledge to service of God. (See also 8:13; 9:10; 14:27; 15:33; 19:23.)
5. Though Wisdom is personified as a woman in Proverbs (1:20–33; 8:1–36; 9:1–6), women are noticeably absent from it, appearing primarily in relation to the young men the book addresses.

## A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
<b>M</b>	Jun. 8	Work for the Good of All	Galatians 6:1–10
<b>T</b>	Jun. 9	Live Together in Harmony	Romans 15:1–6
<b>W</b>	Jun. 10	Wisdom Is Walking Together in Love	2 John 4–11
<b>Th</b>	Jun. 11	Joseph Resists Temptation	Genesis 39:6b–18
<b>F</b>	Jun. 12	Wisdom Saves from Temptation	Proverbs 2:12–19
<b>Sa</b>	Jun. 13	Walk on Just and Good Paths	Proverbs 2:20–22; 4:24–27