

*WISDOM PERSONIFIED, AND LOVE INCARNATE.*

It is not my purpose to discuss the large subject of "Wisdom" in the Hebrew literature. This has been already done in *THE EXPOSITOR* by one well competent for the task (see articles by Dr. Davidson in the year 1880). My purpose is to call attention to a sadly common perversion of part of the noble passage in the opening of the book of Proverbs—an abuse of Scripture which has done and is doing incalculable mischief. It has long been a commonplace of popular evangelical exposition, that "Wisdom" in the book of Proverbs is Christ. The ground of this belief is the unquestionable fact that the greater part of the utterances of "Wisdom" in the Proverbs, especially in the 8th chapter, would come appropriately from the lips of Christ, and some of them are striking anticipations of His gracious invitations and promises.<sup>1</sup> This is just what we should expect. Wisdom is one of the Divine attributes; and Christ "is of God made unto us wisdom," as well as "righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption." We may surely expect, then, that up to a certain point the utterances of Wisdom and of Christ would coincide; so that in these passages in the book of Proverbs we should be able to find, as we find throughout the whole of the Old Testament, some portion of "the testimony of Jesus." But does it follow that because some, or even many, of Wisdom's utterances may be correctly spoken of as the words of Christ Himself, therefore all of them may be so regarded? To see how utterly foolish is this way of reasoning, we have only to remember how many of David's words not only coincide with those of Christ, but are actually quoted in the New

<sup>1</sup> There is, however, a difference even here. For example, take that favourite text, "I love them that love Me." How far short does it come of the grace of the Gospel, in which "God commendeth His love towards us, in that, *while we were yet sinners*, Christ died for us"! The order of grace is not, "I love them that love Me," but, "We love Him, who first loved us."

Testament as if Christ Himself had uttered them ; and yet no one is so foolish as to insist that all the words of David can be safely put into the mouth of Christ. Suppose, for example, that some one should quote David's dying curse upon his enemies as the words of Christ, who would not resent it as a slander on Him whose dying word for His enemies was, " Father, forgive them ; for they know not what they do " ? And yet it could be justified on precisely the same principles on which so many put into the mouth of Christ these awful words : " I also will laugh at your calamity ; I will mock when your fear cometh ; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind ; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer ; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me."

I have been moved to write on this subject by a recent sad experience. An earnest Christian lady, visiting an infirmary, found an old sinner in a very anxious and penitent state of mind. She pointed him to Christ, and told him the Gospel of free grace and dying love. He listened with deep earnestness and great interest ; and then dashed her hopes by telling her sadly that the Gospel was not for him. Asked why he said so, he turned to the 1st chapter of Proverbs, and read the awful sentences we have just quoted. She tried her best to point him to other passages ; but he could not get beyond this one, which seemed so utterly to close the door of hope. The visitor reported the case to her minister. He pointed out to her that these were not the words of Christ, but of Wisdom ; that if there were nothing but wisdom in God, there could be no hope for sinners ; but that " God is Love," that that love has found expression in the gift of His Son Christ Jesus, and that though sinners could not find salvation in any words of Wisdom, they could find all they need in Christ, who can and will " save them to the uttermost that

come unto God by Him." She went back joyfully with her message, delivered it to the sick man, with the result that his face lighted up, and he seemed about to find what he was seeking, when a man lying on the next bed interposed. He had been a local preacher, and had no doubt often preached fiery discourses on these awful words. He told the poor old man that the visitor was all wrong, that all who understood their Bibles knew that "Wisdom" was Christ, and in proof of it triumphantly pointed to some of those sayings in the 8th chapter which read like words of Christ. The result was, that the old despair came back into the poor man's face; and the visitor surrendered too, and to this day feels constrained to treat this passage as an inspired declaration that there are circumstances under which the Lord Jesus Christ laughs at calamity and mocks at prayer!

This is no solitary case. It is a familiar experience, especially in dealing with the comparatively uneducated. And, besides the injury done to anxious souls, no one can tell how many have been driven into infidelity by the unwarrantable liberty which so many good people allow themselves with this passage of Scripture, when they take out the word "Wisdom," and put in the word "Christ" or the word "God." Is it any wonder that those who know not the truth should say, "Better no God at all than one who would laugh at the calamities of His children, and mock them when in agony they pray to Him"?

It does seem, then, of the utmost importance that this passage should be expounded; and it is in the hope of inducing the readers of *THE EXPOSITOR* to do what they can to dispel the popular misunderstanding on the subject, that I avail myself of the opportunity of showing, in as clear a light as possible, wherein the words of Wisdom coincide with those of Christ, and wherein they do not.

As we said at the beginning, wisdom is one of the attri-

butes of God ; and therefore the words of Wisdom must be, up to a certain point, the expression of the Divine mind. We may say that Wisdom expresses the mind of God in creation, in providence, in the whole realm of law. And in this realm, as well as in the realm of grace, the Son of God has His place as the Revealer. As St. John sets forth in the prologue to his gospel, He is the *λόγος*, without whom nothing was made that was made ; and, as St. Paul tells us, " He is before all things, and by Him all things consist " (Col. i. 17). Closely parallel with this we have the remarkable passage in the 8th chapter of Proverbs, beginning, " The Lord possessed me in the beginning of His way, before His works of old " (see the whole passage, *vv.* 22-31). We may then regard Christ and Wisdom as identical *throughout the realm of natural law* ; so that no error would result from the substitution of the one for the other within that range of truth ; but when we leave the realm of law and enter that of grace, it is entirely different ; then it may not only be injurious but fatal to take the utterances of mere wisdom, and put them into the mouth of Christ. If Christ had been only wisdom, He could not have heard the sinner's prayer. But He is also " righteousness and sanctification and redemption " ; and that makes all the difference, for now that He has made an atonement for our sins and opened up the way of life, He can speak, not only in the name of wisdom, but of pardoning mercy and redeeming grace ; and, accordingly, far from laughing at calamity and scorning the penitent's prayer, which wisdom if it were alone might do, He can, and will, and does " save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him."

Having thus considered the extent to which we may expect to find " the testimony of Jesus " in the words of Wisdom, let us now test the principle we have laid down by an examination of the passage. The paragraph begins with this bold and striking personification : " Wisdom

crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets: she crieth in the chief place of concourse, in the openings of the gates: in the city she uttereth her words, saying"—and then follows the passage with which we have mainly to do. Let us then listen to Wisdom's cry, and observe how truthfully and powerfully it is translated into the language of men. We shall see its truth to nature better if we first look back a little. She begins, not with a cry, but with tender words of counsel and of promise (*vv.* 8, 9), "My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother: for they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck." These are the tender and kindly words of counsel in which she addresses the young man setting out in life. Following this are tender and yet solemn words of warning against the tempter whom every one must meet (*v.* 10): "My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not," and so on. But now time passes on, and Wisdom's *protégé* begins to go astray, to forget the instruction of the father and the loving law of the mother; and so now she lifts up her voice and cries, entreating the wanderer to turn before it is too late (*vv.* 22, 23).

Time passes on, and the warning cry has been as little heeded as had been the tender voice of Wisdom at the first. The son, instead of being prudent, has been rash; he has been, not economical, but extravagant; not temperate, but dissipated; and so he has gone on till his last opportunity has been thrown away, his patrimony squandered, his health gone, his last friend lost. Then, once more his early monitor appears. The prodigal remembers the tender words of counsel and of promise. He remembers the solemn and kindly warnings against evil ways. He remembers how, when he was just beginning to go astray, before he had become hopelessly entangled in evil, Wisdom lifted up her voice and *cried*. For a long time his old counsellor

has not been present to his mind at all. He has been hurrying on in courses of evil, but now his very wretchedness forces him to stop and think. And, again, there stands Wisdom before him. How does she address him now? Does she speak to him in soothing tones? Does she promise to restore him his money, or his health, or his friends? Alas, no: she cannot. All she can say is, "I told you it would be so. I warned you what would be the end; and now the end has come. You must eat the fruit of your own ways, and be filled with your own devices." That is positively all that Wisdom can say; and there is no tenderness in her tone. She seems to mock him rather, she seems to laugh at his calamity. It is, in fact, the old story of Wisdom come back as a spectre of Remorse, tossing her snaky head, shaking her bony fingers, flashing her scornful eyes, and muttering, "Ye set a nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also shall laugh at your calamity; I shall mock when your fear cometh; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind, when distress and anguish cometh upon you."

Is it of any use to call upon Wisdom now? Had she been invoked in time, she would have responded as she always does to those who seek her early in life. But will she respond, can she respond, now that life's opportunity is used up, and its prospects utterly blighted? Alas! no. She can only upbraid; she cannot help. They may call upon her now, but she will not, for she cannot, answer; they may seek her now both early and late, but they cannot find her. There is no place of repentance, however carefully they seek it with tears. Such is the voice of Wisdom in the end to those who have despised her counsel in the beginning. And is not the whole representation true to nature? Is it not patent to every intelligent observer of men and things? Yes, it is perfectly true that "Wisdom

crieth without, she uttereth her voice in the streets," and says these very things so loudly that no listening ear can fail to hear them. It is no matter of deep philosophy. It is no ecclesiastical or theological dogma. It belongs to *the Proverbs*, the proverbs of the streets. One does not need to go to church to learn these commonplaces of universal common sense. The merit of Solomon, in this chapter, is not in telling us something we should not otherwise have known; but in putting what everybody knows in a very striking form. The object of the passage is, to bring a strong pressure to bear, specially upon the young, to listen to the voice of Wisdom, while yet her tones are tender and full of promise, before the awful time come when the voice of grave and kindly monition has been altered into tones of bitter mockery and scorn. I question whether in all literature there can be found any more vivid and alarming description of the terror and despair of a remorseful conscience, as it looks back and recalls, when too late, the neglected counsels alike of earthly and of heavenly wisdom.

So far *Wisdom*; and if it were only with her that sinners had to do, it would go hard, not only with the profligate and openly vicious, but with the most respectable. But He with whom we have to do is not known as wisdom. He is wise indeed; and all wisdom is from Him. But there is that in Him which is higher than wisdom. "God is Love." Wisdom is the expression of His will in the realm of law; but love is the expression of Himself. From His works in creation and in providence we can get glimpses of His attributes; but when we wish to know HIM, we must look into the face of Jesus Christ, who is not only Wisdom personified but Love Incarnate, and as such "the image of the invisible God"—and His word is, "Him that cometh unto Me I will in no wise cast out." True indeed, He is too wise to receive sinners into favour without genuine repentance. He could say and often did say the severest things

in condemnation of those who hardened their hearts against God. But He never laughed at calamity,<sup>1</sup> and never refused to hear those who called upon Him.

The love of God is not a lawless love. It is not at variance with Wisdom. The law which ordains that the sinner must eat of the fruit of his own way and be filled with his own devices, cannot be set aside by the mere emotion of compassion. Hence it was necessary, in order to redeem man from the condemnation of sin, that the Holy One of God should suffer. Hence, too, it is that, though by the suffering and death of Christ believers in Him are set free from the condemnation of sin, yet the natural consequences of the transgressions of wisdom's laws are not abolished. If health has been wasted, it will not be miraculously restored. If money has been squandered, there must be suffering from the want of it. If friends have been alienated, they must be won back by the slow process which the laws of wisdom in such cases must demand. If character has been forfeited by dishonesty or impurity, it may never be redeemed on this side the grave. The laws of wisdom are not repealed or set aside, or set at naught; they remain in force. But such has been the ingenuity, so to speak, of the Divine love, that without infringing on the proper domain of wisdom expressing itself in law, the way has been opened up for the full pardon and ultimate restoration even of those who have wandered farthest and sinned most. And accordingly, a passage like

<sup>1</sup> Those who are anxious to make out that God laughs at calamity sometimes refer to Ps. ii. 4 and Ps. xxxvii. 13, as if they expressed the same idea as in the passage before us. This is one of many instances of the danger of mistaking mere verbal coincidences for real parallels. The laughing in the second Psalm is not at calamity, but at the feeble efforts of wicked men to frustrate the Divine purposes. The kings and rulers who are laughed at are not in calamity but in the hey-day of their power, and rejoicing in the supposed success of their rebellion. So, too, in the 37th Psalm the Lord is represented as laughing, not at the calamities, or the prayers, but at the plots of the wicked—manifestly a totally different conception.

this awful one in the first chapter of the book of Proverbs, instead of obscuring the Divine love in the smallest degree, or interposing so much as a thread between the sinner and his Saviour, rather serves as a dark background on which to set forth the radiant form of the Saviour of mankind,

“Whose love appears more orient and more bright,  
Having a foil whereon to shew its light.”

The foil is inexorable Law, the god of modern infidelity, who shews no mercy. Force and Law never show mercy. They always laugh at calamity and mock when fear cometh. When fear cometh as desolation, and destruction cometh as a whirlwind, men may call aloud to the gods of unbelieving science, but they will not answer. And that wisdom which deals only with such matters as law and force, and rejects the revelation of Divine love, has no gospel for humanity. All it does is to spread a dark background which the more vividly sets off by contrast the glad tidings of a Father God, who “forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with loving-kindness and tender mercies.”

Experience has convinced the writer that it would be too much to expect all those who have been in the habit of putting these awful words into the mouth of our Father in heaven or of His Son Christ Jesus to acknowledge that they have been wrong. But surely it should not be too much to ask even of those who are most wedded to traditional interpretations and inferences, to honour the Scriptures so far as to quote them correctly. If they will cling to the idea that when the Bible says “Wisdom” it means to say God, or Christ, then why should they change the word? If it so obviously means God in the book of Proverbs, it will have the same meaning when it is quoted. Let them tell the people that “Wisdom” says these things.

But if they take away the Bible word and put in another, are they not taking the name of the Lord their God in vain? For either "Wisdom" in the passage quoted means God, or it does not. If it does, it is not necessary to make the substitution; and surely it is a vain thing to suppose that their word is better than the word in the Bible. If it does not, as there is no evidence that it does, then in a far more serious sense it is taking God's name in vain to thrust it in. It is not as if there were not passages enough to set forth the wrath of God against sin. No man who accepts the Scriptures as from God can honestly deny that there is a terrible doom for the impenitent sinner. But it is just as plain that God "delighteth in mercy," and "doth not afflict willingly," that there is infinite sorrow in His heart at the thought of the calamities of the wicked, represented throughout the Old Testament by the most pathetic appeals, and expressed with infinite pathos in the tears of Jesus over doomed Jerusalem. Let the vengeance of God be by all means proclaimed against impenitence; but let it be distinctly known that it is the vengeance, not of cruel exultation, but of Divine sorrow and love.

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