

The Arrogance of the Worldly Wise

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[0 : 00] Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we come to your word now, seeking your wisdom for life, for eternity, for your church, your world. So with your word open, heavenly Father, we say speak to us please.

Give us minds to understand and hearts and wills ready to accept and obey. In Jesus' name. Amen. Isaiah 6 begins with those words as Isaiah is commissioned as a prophet of God, a prophet who was going to bring God's words of judgment and hope to his disobedient people, but also who would bring words of judgment and hope to the nations around.

Because although God would use Egypt, Syria and Babylon, who we looked at last week, to bring about his just judgment upon his own people, they were by no means guiltless.

They weren't sinless vehicles, if you like. They had many sins of their own. And in this section of the book we're looking at in this short series, Isaiah is looking out to the nations around Israel and pointing out their underlying sins.

So last week we thought about Babylon, its pride and arrogance over their military strength, and how they thought that however strong the Babylonians thought they were, God was far, far stronger.

[1 : 38] And he was the one who would ultimately prove victorious. Today we turn to the words of judgment on Egypt. Egypt had once been a mighty empire, but by the time Isaiah is writing, its fortunes were on the wane.

However, it still prided itself on its great wisdom. And lots of other nations, including Israel, sometimes turned to Egypt for help and support. But their arrogant pride in their own wisdom kept them blind to the one wisdom that really mattered.

God's wisdom. That's what we're going to look at in Isaiah chapter 19. Let me begin by an overview of the message Isaiah brings, both the condemnation and the hope.

Then we're going to think a little bit about what was wrong with the wisdom of Egypt and how we might find the true wisdom of God. So a quick overview to start with.

As you heard it read through, you would have noticed, I guess, three different sections. First runs from verses 1 to 10, and it tells us what God's judgment on Egypt would look like.

[2 : 45] As everything the Egyptians held dear, everything they worked so hard to perfect and build, would come crumbling down around them. We see God's judgment. So verse 2, the unity of the nation is destroyed.

Verse 3, all their well thought out plans would fail. Verse 5, the river Nile, the lifeblood of Egypt, would dry up. That would lead to the collapse of their farming and the crumbling of their economy. And what about their fabled wisdom? Well, it would vanish. In the day when God appeared, their wisdom would vanish. It would prove worthless. It would lead them, verse 3, to seek the advice of dumb idols and the voices of the long dead.

If they were ever going to prove wise at all. In those first few verses, we see what God's judgment on the nation would look like. Everything the Egyptians treasured and relied on would be taken away, leaving them with nothing.

I think verse 10 is a great way to sum that up. The workers are dejected. The wage earners sick at heart. The second section from 11 to 15 explains why God's judgment has come.

[3 : 54] As I said earlier, although Egypt thought itself to be wise, their wisdom has been faulty all along. And in their moment of greatest need, well, their wisdom turned out to be utterly useless.

The way Isaiah describes it all is pretty grim, isn't it? The Pharaoh's chief advisors are giving senseless advice. The officials are shown to be fools. And the leaders shown to have been deceived.

It's like all those with wisdom or supposed wisdom are drunk on duty. Dizzy with confusion. They may have thought that they were so wise, they were gods. But the Lord's ways were hidden from them.

They have no idea what he is doing. And according to verse 15, they have yet to realise that there is no way out. At least not from within them or from their own wisdom.

But as with Israel itself, as with Babylon, God's grace and mercy have not yet run out. There is still hope, even for Egypt. This God-rejecting, self-confident, proud nation.

[5 : 01] God hasn't finished with them either. So look at verses 16 to 25. What does God promise? He promises to reveal himself to Egypt, verse 21. To send them a saviour, verse 20.

To make his home among them, verses 18 and 19. And incredibly, to call Egypt his people. All this is God's doing.

They didn't figure things out for themselves. They didn't somehow perceive God's plans by their own talents. They needed God to reveal himself to them and then come in and save them.

Or they would have been lost in the dark for all eternity. Well, that's a bit of background. For the rest of our time together, I want to look a bit more deeply at two things. What was wrong with the wisdom of Egypt?

And how do we find and walk ourselves in the wisdom of God? Well, what was wrong with the wisdom of Egypt? What was it that caused their ruin and that led to their demise?

[6 : 05] If I was to ask you who is the wisest of the people you know, I guess probably what you would do is you would think about how people's decisions have turned out, wouldn't you?

So, the wisest person with their money would be the one with the biggest bank accounts and the best investments. If you were to think about the wisest doctor, you would look at their patient records and see how many of their patients get well and live long, healthy lives.

You would look at those kind of things. The wisest spouse or parent would be the one with the strongest marriage, the most settled children and so on. Now, of course, on the face of that, Egypt looked incredibly wise.

It had been settled first around 3,150 BC. It had built huge cities and monuments. You may have visited some of them because they're so great they're still standing.

It had found ways to irrigate the land alongside the Nile. It had invented writing, developed parchments, been a huge centre of literature and a strong economy to boot. Like many other nations, it had had periods when it was doing well and when it was doing less well.

[7 : 15] But Egypt had been a strong presence in the region for thousands of years by the time Isaiah comes and speaks his words of prophecy. But things can look very strong without being very strong, can't they?

So you think of Jesus' famous parable, the wise man who built his house upon the rock and the foolish man who built his house upon the sand. Both houses, if you'd looked at them, would have looked great.

Maybe you'd have looked at the one built on the sand and gone, oh, I'd love a house by the sea. That'd be lovely. Just to walk out of my front door and paddle in the morning, it'd be great. And it was.

Till the storm hit. And at that point, its foundations were washed away and its true weakness that had been there all along was finally revealed.

Sometimes those world-changing, empire-crushing storms take a long time to come around. But they do come around eventually.

[8 : 15] And with the Babylonians, as we saw last week, with Egypt, as it was about to discover, the ultimate storm was the judgment of God. He will intervene in his world. And since Egypt had not built its foundations and hope on God and his Christ, then everything they held dear was about to be swept away.

Egypt was wise in its own eyes. It was wise in the eyes of the world. But although they had seen the glory and majesty of God displayed in their own land at the time of Moses, think about all those great plagues and signs of God's power.

Egypt knew nothing about the wisdom of God because it did not know God. That's the fault line that ultimately caused Egypt's downfall. You see, God is not just the creator of the world.

And the Lord of the universe is if he sets it all going and then walks away. He's the one who sustains the world. He's the one who holds the world together. He's the one who judges the world.

And God is so involved in his world, so present in creation, that living life without him is like building a house on the sand. Or if I could use another analogy, building it over a large tectonic fault, thinking it'll be okay.

[9 : 33] It'll be okay. But sooner or later, whether through the storms of life in this world or the final day of judgments, when we stand before God, all we have built that doesn't conform to the wisdom of God will be swept away.

I'm a rather strange person. I expect many of you know that already. But I've always liked exams. Many of you are thinking, how can you do that? But I have. I like knowing what I know. And sometimes what I don't know. It's nice to have that. But imagine I went into a history exam where the question was about the causes of the Second World War.

And I wrote the best scholarly essay ever on the causes of the First World War. Or if my geography paper was on the rivers of Europe, but instead I wrote a brilliantly well-researched paper about a new cure I'd discovered for pancreatic cancer.

What would be the result of those two exams? Well, I may have written stuff that was absolutely brilliant. But it wasn't what was required. It wasn't the true wisdom I was supposed to display.

[10 : 45] My achievements would not get any reward, do they? Of course not. Under those conditions, with those examiners, all my brilliance would get me nothing. Other people might think that I was worthy of a Nobel Prize, but I'd have failed my exams.

In the same way, God's wisdom and worldly wisdom are two very different things. And despite all their successes and achievements, despite their great ingenuity at the length of their empire, Egypt fell short in the final reckoning because it did not know God nor know his wisdom.

There can be no lasting legacy without him. So what is the wisdom of God? And how do we find it? What does it look like to walk in it? Well, in those final verses from 16 to 25, there are six times when Isaiah uses that phrase, in that day.

In that day. In that day. In that day, this will happen. In that day, that will happen. I think they're a helpful way of getting us to think about the wisdom of God and how we walk in it.

[11 : 56] See, Israel, Egypt, sorry, is first brought to judgment because of its folly. And then to new life as God reveals his wisdom to them.

And that change begins with that first in that day. In that day, they will shudder with fear at the hands of almighty God. That's where true wisdom begins. True wisdom, says the writer of Proverbs, begins and remains rooted in the fear of the Lord.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Now, that kind of fear doesn't mean that we stay petrified. That isn't what the Bible means by the fear of the Lord.

True wisdom recognises God's power and might and glory. But it doesn't run away. Instead, it bows before him in humble worship, pledging allegiance to him.

If God is the source of all wisdom, then the truly wise will accept God's invitation and join themselves to him. Because we recognise that he is the one with the power. And we stand in awe of him.

[12 : 58] The third in that day comes in verse 19. It speaks of an altar being built in the heart of the land. A monument being built at the border. See, true wisdom requires us to acknowledge God everywhere.

In church on Sundays. In school on Mondays. Shopping on Tuesdays. Wednesdays when we're hanging out with friends. As you do your accounts and check your finances on Thursdays.

And the rest of the week too. True wisdom recognises that God is Lord of all. Right in the centre and right on the edge of our lives. We cannot be part-time Christians.

And expect to experience all the joys and blessings God has for us. True wisdom seeks to love, honour and serve God every minute of every day. Fourthly, true wisdom depends on God's self-revelation.

Let me read you verse 21 again. So the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians. And in that day they will acknowledge the Lord. They will worship him with sacrifices and grain offerings.

[14 : 04] They will make vows to the Lord and keep them. True wisdom flows from believing and trusting what God has revealed about himself to us.

Both in the life of Jesus, the incarnation of God as one of us, and in the scriptures. True wisdom recognises that there are certain questions that we can't figure out ourselves.

That we can't know what God is like unless he shows himself to us. That we can't understand what life is about unless God who gives us life reveals that to us.

True wisdom recognises our limitations, relies on God's word for truth and guidance. And is willing to accept God's correction when we wander away. That is a huge challenge for our society today. We saw that in the tragic events of last week. How some in the West feel that the unchanging wisdom of God, particularly around areas of sexuality and marriage and the sanctity of life, are so out of kilter that they are willing to pick up high-powered rifles and shoot dead people who hold to the teachings of the scriptures.

[15:17] That's why Charlie Kirk was shocked. It's also a shock why so many people celebrated and wondered aloud who else they might line up next.

Because we don't want to hear that old wisdom again. We're past that now. Holding on to the truths of God's word is not an easy thing to do. But if we start to take a pair of scissors to God's revealed word, if we remove things that we don't like, or that clashes with our culture, we won't be left with God's wisdom.

We'll be left with our own. And we won't be left with a real God at all, but with a cardboard cut-out God of our own making.

One who won't ever challenge us or correct us. And one who won't be able to save or transform us. Of course, we've got to grapple with God's word and understand it rightly. But when it is clear, we've got to be humbled before it and say, God has revealed this to us.

See, God's word is living and active, sharper than a double-edged sword, full of life and power.

[16:27] And as we take God as his word, as we build our lives on Christ, so the Holy Spirit in us changes us and transforms us more into the likeness of Jesus. You and I cannot be wise without trusting God's revealed word.

But when God's people trust God's wisdom and live by God's wisdom, then the fruit of divine wisdom are visible. Look down at those last few verses. What do we find? Receiving, believing, and walking in godly wisdom brings about extraordinary unity, both across national, within nations, and between nations.

Cultural boundaries come down and God brings mighty blessings as people are brought to sit under that wisdom. Many of these blessings are for now.

Others only come in full flower in eternity when we see God face to face. But God's wisdom isn't just for this world. It is for the next. It has eternity in view. It takes the long view.

So when we read God's word and it challenges us, well, we're willing to take that on board, to suffer now, to be willing to be thought of as fools now, as weird, as weak, because we know that God promises something far more glorious later on.

[17:49] So here's my question as we wrap things up today. Are you godly wise? Are we truly wise? Do the glory, the character, the commands of God loom large in our minds as we make our decisions day by day?

See, today in the West, we have got far greater access to knowledge than at any time in history. More knowledge at our fingertips than at any time in history.

Yet every survey of how people are feeling in the West shows people to be more disconnected, lonelier, more unhappy, more lost, more confused and hopeless than people have ever felt.

And what we need is not more information, but greater wisdom, a greater understanding of God's self-revelation through Jesus Christ and in the Scriptures.

That's where wisdom lies. That's where true greatness can come from. That is where true hope, true joy, true peace, true unity, true flourishing are found.

[18:52] And wonderfully, as we've seen, this isn't something for a select few. It's not just for the Jews in the Old Testament or just for, you know, the English people today. No, God has revealed this to the world, including to nations, even like Egypt.

And the picture we have of Egypt in these verses is strikingly similar to how God related to his ancient people, Israel. What happens?

God reveals himself to them. He rescues them. He makes his dwelling place among them. He teaches them the language so they can talk to him rightly.

He blesses the land so they have plenty to enjoy and to make sacrifices. He turns his ear towards them so that when they find themselves in need, he is on hand to hear and answer.

God even gives them a new name. Egypt, my people. Do you find that extraordinary? What an amazing turnaround.

[19 : 56] This unwise nation, foolish nation. God reveals himself to them and they are brought in. And Egypt's story of his course, our story too, isn't it?

We're just like them. Once we were far from God, God's enemies, and yet God in his mercy revealed himself to us through the death of Jesus on the cross in our place.

He saved us from the power and penalty of sin. He welcomed us into his family. As his children, we have his spirit as our spirit, our access to God, our father in prayer.

We have a seat at his banqueting table. And his word as our guide as we walk through this life on our way to glory. Seeking to live by God's wisdom is often seen as foolishness out in the world. But actually, it's always been that way. That's nothing new. The world laughs at God's wisdom today as it's always done. Just as the good news of Jesus at the time of the early church was thought of as foolishness to the Greek and offensive to the Jew.

[21 : 03] So even today, the good news of Jesus is rejected as foolish, offensive, and out of date, even by some in the church. But that is not the case. As it has ever been, the message of Jesus is still the power of God for the salvation of the world.

And if we think we know better, if we think we are wiser than he, then we must think again and humble ourselves before the God of all wisdom, before he steps in to humble us as he did to mighty Egypt.

Well, this passage is one of great hope, actually. Starts with words of warning, of condemnation, of judgment, but it ends with great hope.

But there is a warning there for us, isn't there? That if we continue to seek to live our lives our way, if we ignore God and his commands, if we think we know best, if we rely on the wisdom of our age as the Egyptians relied on the wisdom of theirs, then when the storms of life crash down around us, we will be left floundering as all we have trusted in gets washed away, taking us with it.

Well, our reading from John's Gospel today told us how we can be truly wise. The words of Jesus, what does he say? My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me.

[22 : 28] You want to be wise? That's where it starts. Hearing what God says, being known by God and then following him. Let's be wise. Let's learn from God's judgment on Egypt.

Let's be wise. Let's listen and obey and build our house on the rock that cannot be shaken. That's what the wise ones have always done.

Let's be like them. Amen. Amen. Amen.