



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

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SERIES V

WISDOM LITERATURE AND NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

Lesson 9 Commentary The Book of Sirach
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THE WISDOM OF THE WISE The Book of Sirach

INTRODUCTION

This wisdom book has one advantage for us over the others. It was written by one author who signed his name. Sirach was a scribe in Jerusalem who had traveled widely and who was renowned for his wisdom. He wrote his book in Hebrew and his grandson translated it into Greek. It was called Ecclesiasticus for centuries as it was widely used by the Church (Latin for church: ecclesiasticus). Sirach probably was written around 190 years before Christ. The meeting of Pharisees, at Jamnia ninety years after Christ, rejected Sirach's book in their canon because it was associated with the Sadducees. It is not in Bibles stemming from Luther who translated the Bible from the books recognized by the Pharisees at that time. It was always in the Bibles before that (all in Greek for Christians) and was especially used by the Fathers of the Church.

The book has no general plan due to its numerous topics which recur more than once. In this paper, and in our study, we shall consider passages under one overall topic.

I. THE ORIGIN AND REWARDS OF WISDOM (Sirach 1:1-8; 4:11-19; 6:18-37; 11:1; 14:20-27; 15:1-10; 24:1-25)

Wisdom comes from the Lord, and yet it remains forever with Him, for it was with Him from eternity. Only one awe-inspiring Being upon His throne truly knows and sees Wisdom, and from His love, poured "her forth upon all his works—upon every living thing, upon his friends."

A. Rewards of Wisdom, The Highest Good (Sirach 6:18-37). A youth, by sowing and plowing that which produces a bountiful crop, finds the wonderful fruits of wisdom. Fools and unruly young people do not know any of this, for she "is not accessible to many" (Sirach 6:23; Baruch 3:12-14). However, by receiving instruction, the favor of God, the glory and blessings that will come from knowing Wisdom, youths will at first "be put to the test;" "tried with wisdom's discipline, then these favors will be won." Those of us who have parented or taught youths, know the tests of adolescence. We can win respect even if rather reluctantly, for "Wisdom"

that we teach, when the results are what Sirach lists here. The last verses in Chapter 6 are of such wisdom that they might well be shared, in words or in writing, with the young (Sirach 6:32-37).

B. The Use of Wealth (Sirach 14:2-19).

The miser, stingy with himself, “refuses his neighbor and brings ruin on himself.” Therefore, says Sirach, “Before you die, be good to your friends and give a share in what you possess” (Sirach 14:13). Jesus elevated this piece of wisdom by teaching: “Do good to those who hate you... Love your enemy” (Matthew 5:43-44).

C. Fear of the Lord (Sirach 1:9-18), 2:7-9, 15-17; 18:1-13; 19:17-20; and 34:13-17).

In the beginning of Sirach, this quality of wisdom is given strong praise:

“Fear of the Lord is glory and splendor, gladness and a crown at a special occasion.” “Fear of the Lord warms the heart... brings a happy end, even at his death, praise.” “Fullness of wisdom is fear of the Lord; knowledge and understanding she showers down” (Sirach 1:9-11, 17). “You who fear the Lord, trust him; your reward will not be lost.” “Those who fear the Lord prepare their hearts and humble themselves before him” (Sirach 2:8, 17). “All wisdom is fear of the Lord” (Sirach 19:17).

The wisdom spoken of here is a deep understanding of who God is, of a willingness to know Him, love Him, and serve Him. It is sort of a healthy respect such as we give to a person of power and wisdom over us.

II. LIVING WITH WISDOM

A. Toward Self. In various ways, Sirach has taught us that Wisdom is the highest good. In other chapters he counsels Wisdom toward our self.

“My son, conduct your affairs with humility, and you will be loved more than a giver of gifts. Humble yourself the more, the greater you are, and you will find favor with God... What is too sublime for you, see not... What is committed to you, attend to... Their own opinion has misled many... Where there is no knowledge, there is no wisdom” (Sirach 3:17, 18, 20, 21, 23-24).

“Rely not on your wealth; nor on your strength... Say not, I have sinned, yet what has befallen me? For the Lord bides his time... Delay not your conversion to the Lord, put it not off from day to day: For suddenly his anger will flame forth...” (Sirach 5:1, 2, 4, 8). “The heart of a man changes his countenance, either for good or for evil. The sign of a good heart is a cheerful countenance...” “Happy the one whose conscience does not reproach him, who has not lost hope” (Sirach 13:24; 14:1-2). “Go not after your lusts, but keep your desires in check. Have no joy in the pleasures of the moment, which bring on poverty redoubled... Wine and women make the mind giddy...” (Sirach 17:30, 32; 19:2). A last quote is a clever way to a “treasure house.” “Store up almsgiving in a treasure house, and it will save you from every evil.” Both having a treasure house and being saved from every evil is indeed a treasure we all hope for; for this, God’s word advises “Almsgiving!”

B. Wisdom in Speech. “Refrain not from speaking at the proper time, and hide not away your wisdom; For it is through speech that wisdom becomes known... Be not ashamed to acknowledge your guilt, but of your ignorance be ashamed... Even to the death, fight for truth, And the Lord God will do battle for you... Be swift to hear but slow to answer... Who will set a guard over my mouth, and upon my lips an effective seal? Let not your mouth form the habit of swearing, or becoming too familiar with the use of the Holy Name... One who swears continually by the Holy Name will not be free from sin.” And among the sins of speech is this strong statement: “A man who has the habit of abusive

language will never mature in character as long as he lives” (Sirach 4:23-26; 5:11, 17; 22:27), and another strong one: “He who betrays a secret cannot be trusted; he will never find an intimate friend” (Sirach 27:16).

“Say nothing harmful, small or great; be not a foe instead of a friend.” “Happy the man whose mouth brings him no grief.” “Let not your mouth become used to coarse talk, for in it lies sinful matter.”

III. WISDOM TOWARD OTHERS

A. Parents (Sirach 3:1-5). “... Pay heed to a father’s right, do so that you may live, for the Lord sets a father in honor over his children; a mother’s authority he confirms over her sons. He who honors his father atones for sins; he stores up riches who reveres his mother. He who honors his father is gladdened by children, and when he prays he is heard. He obeys the LORD who brings comfort to his mother. He who fears the LORD honors his father and... For a father’s blessing gives a family firm roots, but a mother’s curse uproots the growing plant” (Sirach 3:7-9). How badly American and all of modern society need “a family (with) firm roots,” need fathers who “bless” and mothers who are not driven to “curse” (Sirach 3:9-10). Yet we do find those still; values instilled by religious truths from the Bible and from the Church are still lived out in real life.

Sirach ends this chapter on family with advice about the parents in old age:

“My son, take care of your father when he is old; grieve him not as long as he lives.”

“Even if his mind fail, be considerate with him; revile him not in the fullness of your strength. For kindness to a father will not be forgotten, it will serve as a sin offering” (Leviticus 5:27-31—atonement for sin).

B. Friends (Sirach 9:10-16; 11:29-34; 22:19-26; 26:16-21; 37:1-15; 42:1-8). “Discard not an old friend, for the new one cannot equal him. A new friend is like new wine, which you drink with pleasure only when it has aged. Envy not a sinner’s fame; rejoice not at a proud man’s success; keep far from the one who has power to kill... Know that you are stepping among snares and walking over a net... in the fear of God be your glory. Bring not every one into your house... Though one seem like a bird in a cage, he will like a spy pick out your weak spots; turn good into evil...” (Sirach 11:29-31). “He who insults a friend breaks up the friendship... a contemptuous insult, a confidence broken, or a treacherous attack will drive away any friend” (Sirach 22:20-22b). Here is a bit of self-help wisdom: “Make fast friends with a man while he is poor; thus will you enjoy his prosperity with him. In time of trouble remain true to him, so as to share in his inheritance when it comes” (Sirach 22:23). A selfish kind of wisdom!

C. Marriage (Sirach 26:1-18). This whole section is devoted to a good wife. We have considered good fathers and good mothers, now Sirach adds some quite beautiful poetry and valuable ideal on marriage. Again, how Americans and the modern world need such as we read of here. “A worthy wife brings joy to her husband, peaceful and full is his life... A good wife is a generous gift bestowed upon him who fears the Lord. (Note the condition!) Now we hear of faults of wives: “A jealous wife is heartache... and a scourging tongue like ‘false testimony in public,’ A bad wife is a chafing yoke: he who marries her seizes a scorpion. A drunken wife arouses great anger; an unchaste one can be recognized by ‘her eyelids and her haughty stare.’” However, “A gracious wife delights her husband; a gift from the LORD is her governed speech, and her firm virtue is of surpassing worth. Like the sun rising in the LORD’s heavens, the beauty of a virtuous wife is the radiance of her home” (Sirach 26:13-16). If Sirach had developed his

description of “a good husband,” it would have helped a marriage even more...

But Sirach goes here to a good father, to a good parent. “He who disciplines his son will benefit from him, and boast of him among his friends. At the father's death, he will seem not dead, since he leaves after him one like himself. He who spoils his son will have wounds to bandage and will quake inwardly at every outcry; a colt untamed turns out stubborn; a son left to himself grows up unruly. Pamper your child and you will have a terror; indulge a child and you will have grief” (Sirach 30:1-13).

Another section of wisdom advice is devoted to a father's care for his daughter. She is a “treasure that keeps her father wakeful, and worry over her drives away rest, lest she pass her prime unmarried, or when she is married, she be disliked... Keep a close watch on your daughter... lest she make you the sport of your enemies” (Sirach 42:9-14).

The last section from Sirach's Wisdom-writing for his people and God's people is “The Works of God in Nature.” “Now will I recall God's works,” he tells us. “At God's word were his works brought into being, they do his will... As the rising sun is clear to all, so the glory of the LORD fills all his works; Yet even God's holy ones must fail in recounting the wonders of the LORD... The Most High possesses all knowledge, and sees from of old the things that are to come... No understanding does he lack: no single thing escapes him. Perennial is his almighty wisdom; he is from all eternity one and the same” (Sirach 42:15-21). Sirach shows himself a man of wisdom, surely, and a man of reflection on life and its Creator, which he completes in the last chapters of his advice to his readers. It will bear a quiet and thoughtful reading, very probably more than once. Try it (Sirach 43:1-35).

Finally, the wise and faithful Hebrew scholar adds “Israel's Great Ancestors.” Not anywhere

else in the Bible can be found such a thoughtful look at God's leaders of His holy people. Though Sirach had not discovered that life after death is God's gift also, he says of the great ancestors: “These were godly men whose virtues have not been forgotten. Their wealth remains in their families, their heritage with their descendants. Through God's covenant with them, their family endures... Their glory will never be blotted out; Their bodies are peacefully laid away, but their name lives on and on” (Sirach 44:10-14). These are the pages of reflections on worthy men indeed, on those who passed the knowledge of the one true God to us; pages of reflections that we know as the words of God. A quiet reading of these lines about the great Hebrews whom God chose and who, like Enoch, “walked with the Lord and were taken up,” will enrich and deepen our own wisdom.

THE NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

INTRODUCTION

The letters in the New Testament are perhaps the most important books in the Bible, the most read, and the most inspired teaching outside of the Gospels, the Good News of Jesus. Most of these twenty-two books, called “The Epistles” (a formal letter), are from one man who blended the known world of the Mediterranean into himself: a Jew and a Roman citizen, Paul of Tarsus.

The story of Paul begins in the Acts of the Apostles, with his miraculous conversion by the Risen Christ Himself. Fourteen of the twenty-one Letters have been traditionally assigned to Paul. As the knowledge of history and languages has grown, some scholars are convinced that evidence exists that some of these in their vocabulary and style, their theological expressions, and their descriptions of church organizations, are not Paul's; perhaps a disciple of his recorded Paul's teaching. Whatever source they may have, they are God's Word, not only for the first Christians in the Empire of Rome, but for us in our world

today. One evidence of their importance to the Church is that in practically every daily reading in the three year cycle of the Eucharistic Sacrifice (Mass) is one from one of these Letters in the New Testament.

I. SAUL PAULUS OF TARSUS

Saul's name in the family was Jewish; in public, it was Paul—an old Latin name. His home town, Tarsus, was a powerful university town. As a city boy, Paul's similes and descriptions stem from city life.

Paul was at first a persecutor of Jesus' followers (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-9), then a “convert,” and then an Apostle to the whole Roman empire. It is amazing that he walked over all the lands he evangelized, founding church after church, then writing letters of instruction and encouragement to each of them. The first twelve chapters of Acts are of Peter and the Apostles and their assistants; the rest of Acts are of Paul.

Paul wrote his letters in Greek but with a Roman style. In the Letter to the Galatians, he tells of his call from Jesus and of his first years afterwards (Galatians 1:11-24). After a first visit to Jerusalem to meet Peter (Cephas), he returned fourteen years later at the occasion of the First Council of the Church—one held by the Apostles themselves. (There have been twenty-two in all the Christian centuries, the last being The Second Vatican Council of this century.) Others beside the Apostles were in this Council, Barnabas and Titus, for instance, whom Paul brought; today they would probably be called bishops.

This Council of the Church is further described in Acts 15 and gives us an idea of the “hierarchy” of the church discussing and deciding on Church matters, which continues throughout the history of the Church. There is nothing like it in other Christian “churches,” for such unity does not exist among them. One source on Christian churches today, reported four hundred or more differing Christian churches. However,

today there are strong convictions and efforts to reunite the Church among all Christian Churches.

Another continuing phase of the Church occurred at the first council: it asked Paul to collect money from his churches for the destitute poor of Jerusalem where there was a famine. Paul writes of this himself.

Paul had three missionary journeys around the Roman Empire, and planned to visit Rome after a visit back to Jerusalem, but there he was threatened with death by some Jews who charged him before the Roman governor. So the Romans moved him to Caesaria, then to Rome as a prisoner, since he appealed to the emperor. There he was in house arrest until his death by martyrdom around 67 A.D. Peter also was martyred in Rome three years before Paul. Their martyrdoms are celebrated on the same day in the Church—June 29. They are called the “pillars of the church.”

Paul had been converted only one or two years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, both in Jerusalem, the “Holy City.”

II. THE CHURCH FOUNDED BY PETER AND PAUL

The first preaching of the new faith was by Peter on Pentecost. Later he and John preached in the temple, then began to go to other towns in Judea and Samaria. This first Church was bilingual, for Christians were either Hellenists (Greek-speaking people from the earlier empire) or Hebrews with Jewish traditions and language. Hellenists (also Jews) were educated outside of Palestine. Hebrew Christians spoke Aramaic for they were under the direct leadership of the Twelve, chosen by Christ from Galilee where Aramaic was the spoken form of Hebrew. In Jerusalem, the Greek-speaking Christians had their leaders: seven deacons, one of whom was Stephen, the first martyr for Christ. Paul had been educated in Hellenist culture and tradition in Jerusalem, so he was influenced by both Aramaic

and Greek speaking believers, thus he was a link between the Jewish Christians and Hellenist Christians. Paul belonged to both cultures; this shows us God's divine plans in developing proper leaders for His Church, inspiring and calling those necessary.

As you have noticed and will more so as you study the letters of the New Testament, the early Christians felt a need of extending the teaching of Christ. They were not TV evangelists who offer a product but remain isolated from the community, for the community is all-important in the Church. Paul writes:

for “the same God accomplishes all of his gifts in everyone, for the common good... All members many though they are, are one body... Now the body is not one member, it is many... if the body we have were all eye, what would happen to our hearing?... If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members share its joy. You, then, are the Body of Christ... God has set up in the Church first, Apostles, then prophets, teachers, then miracle workers, healers, assistants, administrators and those who speak in tongues. Do all have these gifts? Set your hearts on the greater gifts!” (1 Corinthians, excerpts from Chapter 12).

III. THE CHURCH AND THE PAGAN WORLDS

This world had been conquered and “Hellenized” by Alexander the Great, the extraordinary Macedonian emperor, an admirable man. His early death left Greece to deal with all the countries he had conquered in what we call the Near East, stretching almost to China and India, and also in Northern Africa. It was a complex world of many races, some backward. All had a civilization derived from Greece but under a political power from Rome which also had been brought

to the culture of Greece, probably the finest the pagan world ever saw. Rome's civic virtues and public service were inculcated in the Teutonic peoples that had overrun what is now Germany, France and Spain. An autocratic government was the one that could handle so vast a people. Besides autocratic, central government, Rome also developed worship of a single god—the Roman emperor.

Rome was able to establish peace, called the “Pax Romana,” in all these lands. Though liberty was sacrificed, the peace came to include unity and order in the world. In Greece, the development of philosophy (the love of wisdom) gave the world great learning; in Rome, the development of Roman Law, a gift to the world and a source of European legal standards.

But one wide-spread evil was rampant in Roman society: sexual immorality. Pagans had no problem with sexual intercourse, either heterosexual or homosexual. The ancient pagan world even decorated the walls with pictures of such relationships, in the home or in the brothels, which were often in the home. The Jewish sense of family and moral right or wrong imposed restriction on such morality (or immorality!). Some pagans called themselves devout in their religion, though sunk in superstition or lust. Christ's teaching was so far above this, elevating marriage and sexual conduct even to: “Moses commanded: 'Thou shall not commit adultery,' but I say to you: anyone who looks lustfully at a woman has already committed adultery with her in his thoughts. If your eye is your trouble, gouge it out and throw it away! Better to lose part of your body than to have it all cast into hell” (Matthew 5:29).

IV. THE NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS AND US

Besides the moral and theological teaching for the Church in the letters of Paul, James, Peter and John, the Letters contain teaching on the spi-

ritual life, prayer, love of God, Christian morals, liturgy, persuasive passages on holiness, etc., that ring with God's Holy Spirit and Holiness and draw us to seek the heights of Christian holiness.

One of the early discoverers of this was St. Augustine who wrote in his Confessions (VII, 21):

“I seized greedily upon the venerable writings inspired by Thy Spirit, and especially upon those of the Apostle Paul... Wondrously did these truths sink into my very being when I read that ‘least of the Apostles,’ and looked upon Your works and trembled...”

The sanctity of the saints was nourished by Paul's letters, as testified by St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila and their followers three centuries later—St. Thérèse of Lisieux and Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity. All of these left writings that bring teachings of Paul to their finest effects.

For the Church today and each of us, “these truths (can) sink into our very being” when we read words of Paul to the Galatians on the proper

use of freedom for our age; our youth and our society are greatly in error on important truths:

“If you live according to the Spirit, you will not yield to the cravings of the flesh.”

“It is obvious what comes from the flesh: lewd conduct, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hostilities, bickering, jealousy, outbursts of rage, selfish rivalries, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I have warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

“In contrast, the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness, and chastity. Against such there is no law! Since we live by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's lead” (Galatians 5:19-25).

A class in religion in a Catholic high school was astounded when the above passage was read out... “Those who do such things will not inherit the Kingdom of God!”

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QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 10
1 & 2 Thessalonians

Day 1 Read the Notes on Sirach.

- a. In what way were they helpful to you in understanding Sirach?

- b. As the last of your study of the Bible's Old Testament Wisdom literature, was any one book most interesting or your favorite? Explain why.

Day 2 Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; 2:1-13; Acts 13:52.

- a. In what ways were the Thessalonians models for us?

- b. In 1 Thessalonians 2:4, what challenges us?

- c. Share what helped or enlightened you in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-13.

Day 3 Read 1 Thessalonians 2:14-20; 2 Corinthians 1:14.

- a. What does this reveal about the first converts?

- b. Read 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13. Choose a verse or so that enlightens or helps you and share it.

Day 4 Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8; Psalm 79:6.

- a. In the light of this teaching, comment on what you know of the environment of today's youths; what has helped you with your teenagers?

- b. Do you think St. Paul's instructions in 1 Thessalonians 4:2-3a are important to most Catholics?

- c. Share your reaction to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17.

Day 5 Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-18; 2 Peter 3:10.

- a. Share one verse in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 that speaks to you and say why.

- b. Name some “among you whose task it is to exercise authority in the Lord.” What would St. Paul expect of us in this matter? (1 Thessalonians 5:12-22).

Day 6 Read 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12; Isaiah 2:10.

- a. From St. Paul's praise to these new Christians, choose one that your Christian community has or that would be helpful now and why.

- b. Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17, Isaiah 66:15; Matthew 24:24. In verse 4, how can we recognize “the son of perdition”?

- c. Read 2 Thessalonians 3:1-18. Comment on 3:10 and 3:16.