

## **SIRACH 1:1 – 4:10**

**<sup>1</sup>All wisdom is from YHWH\*,  
and with him it remains forever.**

**<sup>2</sup>The sand of the sea,  
the drops of rain,  
the days of eternity –  
who can count them?**

**<sup>3</sup>Heaven's height, earth's breadth,  
the depth of the abyss –  
who can work them out?**

**<sup>4</sup>Wisdom was created  
before all other things,  
and prudent understanding  
from eternity.**

Verse 5 is an expansion of Ben Sira's text.

**<sup>6</sup>The root of wisdom –  
to whom has it been revealed?  
Her subtleties—who knows them?**

Verse 7 is an expansion of Ben Sira's text.

**<sup>8</sup>There is but One, wise,  
and greatly to be feared,  
seated upon his throne – the Lord.**

**<sup>9</sup>He it is who fashioned her;  
he gazes upon her  
and knows her measure;**

**he has poured her out  
upon all he has made,**

**<sup>10</sup>upon every living thing,  
according to his bounty;**

**he has lavished her  
upon those who love him.**

In composing the Introduction to his book, Ben Sira is drawing on Proverbs 8:22-31.

Wisdom (Greek: σοφία; Hebrew: חָכְמָה) covers all areas of know-how (skill). In regard to human beings it applies especially to skill in the art of living a good life, in relation to one's neighbour, one's world, and one's God. Ben Sira is echoing the wisdom tradition of his people when he claims that all wisdom belongs to YHWH, who bestows it, according to his bounty, upon everything he has made, upon all people, and especially 'upon those who love him'. He will go on to say that the key to living a good life is found in the Torah (see 1:26-27).

A note on YHWH\*

This is a personal address for God derived from the root *hyh* [Hebrew *הָיָה*], 'to be/cause to be'. From the burning bush God revealed himself to Moses as being determined to free those enslaved in Egypt. When Moses wanted to know God's name, God replied:

You shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM [Hebrew *ehyeh*, *אֶהְיֶה*], has sent me to you.'

You shall say to the Israelites, 'YHWH, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you'. This is my name forever.

– Exodus 3:14-15

Throughout this commentary YHWH is written in capitals to highlight the fact that it is a proper name and in deference to the Jewish practice of not pronouncing the divine name or writing it in its pronounceable form. When they read YHWH, they bow their head and say the word 'adonay' ('Lord'). The letters YHWH point to the mystery of a God who is infinitely beyond all our human titles, but who nevertheless comes intimately close to us.

The Wisdom literature of the Older Testament sees wisdom as a divine quality. When we encounter wisdom we are encountering something of the divine that has been poured out upon creation:

YHWH gives wisdom.

– Proverbs 2:6

With God are wisdom and strength; he has counsel and understanding.

– Job 12:13

We find the same teaching in the Newer Testament. In the Prologue to his Gospel, John speaks of God's 'Word', that is to say God's self-giving that reveals his wisdom in word and in deed. He writes:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.  
The Word was in the beginning with God.

– John 1:1-2

John goes on to see Jesus as the incarnation of God's Word, and so of God's Wisdom (John 1:14). As the incarnation of divine Wisdom, Jesus can say:

I have come that you may live, and live to the full.

– John 10:10

In the Letter of James we read:

If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you ... Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of change.

– James 1:15, 17

We cannot comprehend 'the breadth and length and height and depth' (Ephesians 3:18) of divine wisdom:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

– Romans 11:33

Ben Sira draws his image of God 'seated upon his throne' (verse 8) from Isaiah 6:1. When he declares that the only One who can comprehend divine Wisdom is YHWH and describes YHWH as 'wise', but also as 'greatly to be feared' (verse 8), he is echoing the traditional language of the Wisdom tradition:

The fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom.

– Proverbs 9:10

God pours wisdom out upon all his creatures (verse 10). Ben Sira recognises the wisdom he found in the Greeks (see also Proverbs 8:15-16). However, he wants his readers to recognise that nowhere did God pour out his wisdom more than upon 'those who love him'; that is to say, upon the Jewish people. He did this in order that the individual and the community would enjoy 'peace' (*šālōm*), a fulness of life that can come only as a gift from God. That is why 'fear of YHWH' is seen as the foundation for wisdom. Perhaps the 'of' is better translated 'from', for this 'fear' is seen as a gift *from* God. In the words of Isaiah:

## Introduction

The spirit of YHWH will rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of YHWH. His delight will be in the fear of YHWH.

– Isaiah 11:2-3

The prophet Joel, too, speaks of God's lavish gift of his spirit:

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.

– Joel 2:28 (see Acts 2:17-18)

As Isaiah states, it is a spirit of wisdom. It is also a spirit of 'fear of YHWH'.

The Psalmist states:

The fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom.

– Psalm 111:10

Happy are those who fear YHWH, who greatly delight in his commandments.

– Psalm 112:1

Happy is everyone who fears YHWH, who walks in his ways.

You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you.

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table.

Thus shall the man be blessed who fears YHWH.

– Psalm 128:1-4

Job declares:

Truly, the fear of YHWH, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.

– Job 28:28

In the Newer Testament, as a response to God as revealed in Jesus, John can write:

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

– 1John 4:18

Prior to Jesus it is understandable that God was seen not only as a source of love, but also as an object of fear. The expression 'fear of YHWH', however, focuses more radically on a gift received from God, the source of all wisdom: a sense of the sacred at the heart of the world, a sense that inspires awe and wonder and an openness to mystery. It is this reverence that expands our experience of the everyday. Relying on God, and putting our trust in God, we have the courage to explore experience, knowing that, however easy or hard our circumstances may be, God, who has chosen us as his own, is at the heart of the world that he transcends.

This is also why 'Wisdom' is personified – something that appears to be unique to Israel. Dermot Cox in his *Proverbs* (Michael Glazier 1982, page 74) writes:

Wisdom is a channel by which God can reach out to humanity, and draw humanity to himself, led by the voice of creation and its inherent mystery.

We cannot comprehend God, and we cannot comprehend life. God appeals to us through 'Wisdom' to live reflective lives. In this way we will play our part in ordering the world for God and in building communities that will bring about the reign of God in this world.

After the Introduction (verses 1-10), Ben Sira sings of wisdom in a poem of 22 lines, divided into two equal parts (verses 11-21 and 22-30). The 22 lines represent the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. It is a way of stating the all-encompassing nature of wisdom.

In the first part (verses 11-21) the 11 lines in the Hebrew text stress the intimate relationship between wisdom and the fear of YHWH (see the commentary on verse 8). If we want to become wise we must know that wisdom is never something we can acquire by our own effort. Every skill – and this is especially true of skill in the art of living – comes as a gift from God ('formed with the faithful in the womb', verse 14). It is God who is holding us in existence and sharing his wisdom with us. The truly wise live their lives knowing this and conscious of the awesome presence and action of the mysterious God in every aspect of their existence.

O Israel, what does YHWH your God require of you? Only to fear YHWH your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

– Deuteronomy 10:12

'Gladness' in verses 11 and 12 translates the Greek εὐφροσύνη. The gladness is the fruit of a wholesome way of thinking that bears fruit in an upright and virtuous life. The poem goes on to list some of the fruits of this 'fear', including 'peace' (Greek: εἰρήνην; Hebrew שָׁלוֹם), and concludes with a reference to God's 'wrath' (verse 21).

- [1] <sup>11</sup>**Fear of YHWH is glory and exultation, gladness and a festive crown.**
- [2] <sup>12</sup>**Fear of YHWH delights the heart, giving gladness and joy and a long life.**
- [3] <sup>13</sup>**Those who fear YHWH will have a happy end; on the day of their death they will be blessed.**
- [4] <sup>14</sup>**Fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom; she is formed with the faithful in the womb.**
- [5] <sup>15</sup>**With the godly she was created from of old, with their descendants she will abide faithfully.**
- [6] <sup>16</sup>**Fear of YHWH is fullness of wisdom; she inebriates with her fruits;**
- [7] <sup>17</sup>**she fills their whole house with choice foods, and their storehouses with her produce.**
- [8] <sup>18</sup>**Fear of YHWH is the garland of wisdom, with blossoms of peace and perfect health.**
- [9] <sup>19</sup>**She rains down knowledge and full understanding; she heightens the glory of those who possess her.**
- [10] <sup>20</sup>**Fear of YHWH is the root of wisdom; her branches are a long life.**
- [11] <sup>21</sup>**Fear of YHWH keeps sin far off; it stays and turns back all God's wrath.**

## The 'anger of God'

The first part of the poem concludes with the words: 'The fear of YHWH keeps sin far off; it stays with us and turns back all God's wrath'(verse 21). An abiding sense of the presence of the Holy One in one's life, keeps a person sensitive to the movement of God's spirit directing and enabling us to do God's will, and so to 'keep sin far off'. To the extent that we choose not to sin, we avoid the negative effects of sin, effects which we bring upon ourselves by sinning:

Your own wickedness is punishing you, your own apostasies are rebuking you. Consider carefully how evil and bitter it is for you to abandon YHWH.

– Jeremiah 2:19

We need to examine why it is that the negative effects of sin are connected here, and throughout the Older Testament, with 'God's wrath'. Let us listen to Jeremiah (25:7):

You would not listen to me, says YHWH, and so, by what you have done, you have provoked me to anger to your own harm.

Isaiah (57:16) knows that God is reluctant to express his anger, but he is angry all the same:

I do not want to be forever accusing, nor always angry, or the spirit would fail under my onslaught, the souls that I myself have made.

One assumption underlying the connection between sin and divine anger is the understanding that pervades the whole of the Older Testament that everything that happens is in some way willed by God, who controls nature and history, such that happenings that are judged to be good are seen as expressions of God's blessing, whereas happenings that are judged to be bad are seen as expressions of God's disapproval ('wrath') and punishment. We looked at this assumption in the Introduction (see pages 8-9). The basis for this misunderstanding is their way of thinking of 'power'. In our human experience power is often abused. It is often expressed as control. When the authors think of God as 'Almighty', declaring their faith that there are no limits to God's power, they have not yet come to the insight (so clear in the life and words of Jesus) that God is love, and consequently that the power God has is the power of love. It is God's love-power that has no limits. God has chosen not to control. No wonder it was difficult for Jesus' contemporaries to see God's 'almighty power' revealed in the one who was crucified on Calvary. Paul recognised this as 'a stumbling block for the Jews'(1Corinthians 1:23).

Ben Sira, as we will see, is aware of the responsibility of human beings for bringing about the suffering that we experience, but he still conceives of a God who is the ultimate determiner of what happens. If we suffer as a consequence of our sin, God must be angry with us and must be punishing us for failing to do his will.

When we close ourselves to God's gracious will (what Ben Sira calls 'sin') God respects our freedom even when our choices hurt us and hurt others. But God continues to offer healing, forgiving, creating love. Ben Sira will state this, and state it beautifully, but the way he understand God's relationship with the world is quite different from what Jesus revealed. We no longer assume that things happen because they are either directly willed or directly allowed by a God who controls everything. If we are looking for what God is doing we have learned to look for love. We don't – or at least we shouldn't – assume that it was God who determined that Jesus would be crucified. Jesus was crucified by people who chose to resist God's will.

As Jesus says to those who rejected him: ‘You look for an opportunity to kill me because there is no place in you for my word’ (John 8:37). What God willed was that Jesus respond in love, and that is what happened, because Jesus chose to listen and to respond to grace.

The habit of looking at reality simultaneously on two levels enabled Older Testament writers, including Ben Sira, to see any disagreeable situation as being the self-inflicted results of bad human decisions, and as being at the same time evidence of divine anger and divine punishment for sin. If we understand this as eliminating or bypassing human causality we are failing to grasp the subtlety of Older Testament theology. God is not another and a dominant actor in human history. God is the transcendent one. Ben Sira and the other Wisdom teachers of the Older Testament join the prophets in seeing beyond the human arena to the transcendent will of YHWH, to point to the evidence of God’s action in history, to stir people to listen to God’s word and to heed it, in order that they might be effective instruments of God in the world and carry out faithfully the mission given to them. Their aim in speaking and writing as they did was to direct people’s attention in the actual circumstances of their life to the presence and action of God offering them life and calling them to respond in faith.

However, it was their erroneous assumption that it is God who determined everything that happens in our world that underlies their use of the expression ‘fear of the Lord’. We looked briefly at the expression in relation to Sirach 1:8, and it is the main theme of Sirach 1:11-21, so we will continue our reflection in the light of what we have just said about God’s commitment to human freedom.

The most common word for ‘fear’ in the psalms (where it occurs 83 times) derives from the Hebrew verb *yāra’* [יָרָא]. If we oppose God’s will we must fear the consequences. If we act unjustly, if we oppress the poor, we cannot expect to avoid suffering the consequences of such behaviour. As the Hebrew understanding of God was refined, so was their understanding of fear in relation to YHWH. The Book of Proverbs is enlightening when it explains that ‘the fear of YHWH is hatred of evil’ (Proverbs 8:13), and equates it with knowing YHWH: ‘The fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom; knowledge of the Holy One is insight’ (Proverbs 9:10). ‘The fear of YHWH is a fountain of life’ (Proverbs 14:27). As we saw earlier (see page 18) Isaiah speaks of the fear of YHWH as one of the gifts of the Spirit (Isaiah 11:3) and he writes: ‘The fear of YHWH is Zion’s treasure’ (Isaiah 33:6). In a person who is striving to know and do God’s will it is the opposite of pride and self-reliance.

Fear of YHWH is the experience of knowing the Holy One: knowing that God is transcendent and awesome. In this sense it is better translated ‘fear from (given as a gift by) YHWH’. The Greek Septuagint usually translates the Hebrew ‘Fear of YHWH’ literally, but in three texts (Proverbs 1:7; Isaiah 11:2 and Isaiah 33:6) it uses *eusebeia* [εὐσεβεία], the Greek word for ‘religion’, the equivalent of the Roman ‘*pietas*’. Basic to religion is the realisation that God is God and we are creatures, totally dependent upon God. All we have is gift, and if we reject the gift we reject life. This should lead to fear – not fear of God, who is love, but a profound sense of awe accompanied by fear of our capacity to misuse our freedom and lose the communion with God in which life ultimately consists.

## Fear of the Lord

Our understanding of 'fear of YHWH' has been further transformed by what Jesus revealed about God. The expression occurs only twice in the New Testament (2Corinthians 5:11 and Acts 9:31). Over and above a sense of awe in God's presence and a profound humility before God, it includes a hatred of sin and a real fear of one's capacity to turn from grace and lose one's way.



In the second half of Ben Sira's poem (1:22-30), in light of what he has said about wisdom and the fear of the Lord, Ben Sira exhorts his readers to live a life governed by wisdom.

Having introduced the concept of divine anger, which, by definition, is always just, Ben Sira begins his exhortation by offering some reflections on human unjust anger. He is drawing on Proverbs:

Fools show their anger at once,  
but the prudent ignore an insult.

– Proverbs 12:16

Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but one who has a hasty temper exalts folly.

– Proverbs 14:29

A soft answer turns away wrath,  
but a harsh word stirs up anger.

– Proverbs 15:1

Those who are hot-tempered stir up strife, but those who are slow to anger calm contention.

– Proverbs 15:18

One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city.

– Proverbs 16:32

It is honourable to refrain from strife,  
but every fool is quick to quarrel.

– Proverbs 20:3

A fool gives full vent to anger,  
but the wise quietly holds it back.

– Proverbs 29:11

[12]

**<sup>22</sup>Unjust anger cannot be justified;  
anger plunges a person  
to his downfall.**

[13]

**<sup>23</sup>A patient person maintains his calm,  
and then gladness  
comes back to him.**

[14]

**<sup>24</sup>He keeps holding back his words;  
then many lips tell of his  
understanding.**

Live wisely

[15]

<sup>25</sup>Among wisdom's treasures are  
wise sayings,  
but to a sinner fear of the Lord  
is an abomination.

[16]

<sup>26</sup>If you desire wisdom, keep the  
commandments,  
and the Lord will lavish her  
upon you.

[17]

<sup>27</sup>Fear of the Lord is wisdom  
and discipline,  
trust and gentleness are his delight.

[18]

<sup>28</sup>Do not be unfaithful to the  
fear of the Lord;  
do not approach it with  
a divided heart.

[19]

<sup>29</sup>Do not be a hypocrite before others;  
keep watch over your lips.

[20]

<sup>30</sup>Do not exalt yourself, or you may fall  
and bring dishonour upon yourself.

[21]

Then the Lord will reveal your secrets  
and cast you down before the whole  
congregation,

[22]

because you approached  
the fear of the Lord,  
with a heart full of deceit.

'Wise sayings' translates the Greek: *parabolē*, παραβολή; Hebrew *māšāl*, מִשָּׁל). It is the title given to the Book of 'Proverbs'. The word covers a wide range of genres. Essentially it is a saying that involves the use of metaphor or simile. It says one thing, inviting the reader to apply the truth to other situations ('A stitch in time saves nine').

When we sin we think we can find happiness by following our own unruly desires. The last thing we want is to think of God, for all that does is take away the happiness we hoped to gain by sin, and confront us with the consequences of our behaviour. This introduces fear into our lives. We want to avoid that at all costs (verse 25).

Ben Sira has not yet mentioned the Law (the Torah), though his grandson spoke of it a number of times in his Foreword (see verses 1, 3, 4, 7 and 10). It is especially in the Torah that we find the 'commandments'(verse 26). He will go on to speak of 'trust'(verse 27; see Sirach 2), and 'gentleness'(verse 27; see Sirach 3:17). The Psalmist speaks of those who

utter lies to each other; they speak  
with flattering lips and a double heart.

– Psalm 12:2

The central call of the Torah is to

love YHWH your God with all  
your heart, and with all your soul,  
and with all your might.

– Deuteronomy 6:5

In verse 30, Ben Sira is echoing Proverbs 5:12-14.

"Oh, how my heart despised reproof!  
I did not listen to the voice of my  
teachers or incline my ear to my  
instructors. Now I am at the point of  
utter ruin in the public assembly."

‘My son’: Ben Sira is addressing his young students.

In verses 1-5 he is preparing them for the sufferings that life brings to everyone. If they sin, the suffering is seen as punishment: an expression of God’s anger. If they are faithful, suffering is seen as a test.

I will refine them as one refines silver,  
and test them as gold is tested. They  
will call on my name, and I will answer  
them. I will say, “They are my people”;  
and they will say, “YHWH is our God.”

– Zechariah 13:9

My son, do not despise YHWH’s discipline or tire of his reproof, for YHWH reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.

– Proverbs 3:11-12

You, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.

– Psalm 66:10

We find the same idea in the Newer Testament:

Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

– James 1:12

You are suffering various trials so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

– 1Peter 1:7

When affliction comes upon us we must remain ‘steadfast’(verse 2), ‘accepting’(verse 4) and ‘patient’(verse 4). Above all we must keep our heart directed to God (verse 2). We must ‘cling to him and not forsake him’(verse 3).

**<sup>1</sup>My son, when you come  
to serve the Lord,  
prepare yourself for testing.**

**<sup>2</sup>Be sincere of heart and steadfast,  
and do not be impetuous  
in time of calamity.**

**<sup>3</sup>Cling to him  
and do not forsake him,  
so that your future will be  
prosperous.**

**<sup>4</sup>Accept whatever befalls you,  
and in times of humiliation  
be patient.**

**<sup>5</sup>For gold is tested in the fire,  
and those God favours,  
in the crucible of humiliation.**

Trust, hope in God's mercy

**<sup>6</sup>Trust in him,  
and he will help you;  
make your ways straight,  
and hope in him.**

**<sup>7</sup>You who fear the Lord,  
wait for his mercy;  
do not stray, or you will fall.**

**<sup>8</sup>You who fear the Lord,  
trust in him,  
and your reward  
will not be lost.**

**<sup>9</sup>You who fear the Lord,  
hope for good things,  
for lasting joy and mercy.**

'Trust' translates the Greek πιστευειν. It speaks of believing in a person, knowing their love and relying on them. 'Hope' translates the Greek ελπιζειν.

In English 'hope' is closely associated with 'expectation' and 'desire'. In the Hebrew Wisdom Literature it is better to understand it in terms of trust. Those who put their hope in God entrust their present and their future confidently to God's hands, and so, undistracted by longing or fear in relation to the future, they can live now in God's presence, attentive to his Spirit and obeying his inspiration.

Trust in YHWH, and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.

– Psalm 37:3

You, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, YHWH, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you.

– Psalm 71:5-6

Trust in YHWH with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

– Proverbs 3:5-6

In verses 7 and 9 Ben Sira speaks for the first time of God's 'mercy' [Greek: ελεος]. He will return to this many times:

The Lord is patient with them and pours out his mercy upon them ... The compassion of human beings is for their neighbours, but the compassion of the Lord is for every living thing.

– Sirach 18:11, 13

The Lord will never give up his mercy, or cause any of his works to perish.

– Sirach 47:22

See also Sirach 2:18; 5:6; 16:11-12; 18:5; 35:25-26; 50:22, 24; 51:3, 8, 29.

On 'lasting joy' see Isaiah 35:10; 51:11; 61:7.

The Greek word ἔλεος translates a number of Hebrew words. One is ḥānan [חָנַן] to show favour [Hebrew ḥēn, חֵן], to be ‘gracious’ [Hebrew ḥannūn, חַנּוּן]. When used of God it refers to the many particular ways in which God graces his people, or an individual. Another is the root rḥm, from which is derived the noun raḥ<sup>a</sup>mîm [רַחֲמִים] which speaks of God’s tender compassion, and is related to the word for womb [reḥem; רֶחֶם]. Another is ḥesed [חֶסֶד], which speaks of God’s fidelity to the covenant he has made with his people (translated ‘kindness’ in the following texts). These are qualities attributed to God in the creedal formula that recurs throughout the Bible:

YHWH, YHWH, a God tenderly compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in kindness and faithfulness.

– Exodus 34:6

Return to YHWH, your God, for he is gracious and tenderly compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in kindness.

– Joel 2:13

I knew that you are a gracious God and tenderly compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in kindness.

– Jonah 4:2

You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and tenderly compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in kindness.

– Nehemiah 9:17

YHWH your God is gracious and tenderly compassionate, and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him.

– 2Chronicles 30:9

We find this creedal formula a number of times in the psalms:

You, YHWH, are a God compassionate and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in kindness and faithfulness.

– Psalm 86:15

YHWH is compassionate and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in kindness.

– Psalm 103:8

YHWH is merciful and compassionate.

– Psalm 111:4

Merciful is YHWH, and just.

– Psalm 116:5

YHWH is compassionate and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in kindness.

– Psalm 145:8

**<sup>10</sup>Consider the generations of old  
and understand:  
has anyone trusted in the Lord  
and been disappointed?  
Has anyone persevered  
in the fear of the Lord  
and been forsaken?  
Has anyone called upon him  
and been rebuffed?  
<sup>11</sup>For the Lord is compassionate  
and merciful;  
he forgives sins and saves  
in time of distress.**

In verse 10 we hear the teacher directing his students to reflect on the past. His rhetorical questions expect the answer ‘No’. Ben Sira is not saying that the just never experience disappointment, and do not sometimes feel forsaken. He would not be impressed by the statement found in Psalm 37:25! He is encouraging trust and prayer. Ultimately it will be clear that God does respond to the cry of the innocent.

In verse 11 Ben Sira speaks of God as ‘compassionate [Greek: οἰκτίρων] and ‘merciful’ [Greek: ἐλεήμων]. This is the only time he uses οἰκτίρων, though it occurs often in the Psalms (see, for example the texts on page 27, where it is translated ‘compassionate’). Ben Sira has already spoken of divine mercy (see page 27).

For the first time Ben Sira speaks of ‘sin’ [Greek: ἁμαρτία ; though see 1:25 where he spoke of the ‘sinner’). The Hebrew word which stands behind the Greek is ḥāṭā’ [חַטָּא]. Basically the word in both Hebrew and Greek means ‘missing the mark’: failing to walk on the right path. For Ben Sira, this means failing to follow the Torah. It is used of an offence committed against someone with whom one is in an established relationship. The offence can be deliberate or unintentional. It covers not only the offence but also the consequences for the sinner and for whatever it is that he has polluted through his sin. In the psalms it is often used in the context of specific cultic actions and can mean ‘an offering made for sin’. The sin can be ‘forgiven’ by a third party (see Exodus 10:17; 1Samuel 15:25) or by the person against whom the offence was committed (see Genesis 50:17; Exodus 32:32).

The Psalmist pleads with YHWH to remove (Hebrew *nāšā'*, נָשָׂא) the sphere of guilt from the sinner (Psalm 32:5). YHWH is also asked to 'look away from' the sin (Psalm 51:11); to 'cover over' (Hebrew *kāśah*, כָּסָה) the sin (Psalm 32:1); to rub it out (Hebrew *māḥah*, מָחָה; Psalm 109:14); to wash it away (Hebrew *kābas*, כָּבַס; Psalm 51:4,9); to purge it away (Hebrew *tāhar*, טָהַר; Psalm 51:7); to atone for it (Hebrew *kipper*, כִּפֶּה; Psalm 79:9); to not remember it (Hebrew *zākar*, זָכַר; Psalm 25:7).

A related Hebrew word is *peša'* [פָּשַׁע] which denotes a break in relationships caused by an act against just order that is so serious as to provoke outrage and threaten serious sanctions. It can be a break between persons or countries. The Greek Septuagint ranges across eight different words to pick up the nuance in different contexts. Accused by Laban, Jacob replies: 'What is my transgression? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me?' (Genesis 31:36). In the prophet Amos (chapter 1) we have YHWH accusing various nations of atrocious 'transgressions' that demand the severest of punishments. In regard to YHWH it denotes a rebellion that breaks communion – a break that YHWH wants to mend. A key text is the credal formula which asserts that YHWH is the one who forgives 'guilt and transgression and sin' (Exodus 34:7).

After speaking of God as forgiving sin, Ben Sira goes on to reassure his readers that it is God who saves [Greek: σώσειν]. The verb *hōšīa'* (to 'help', 'save' 'deliver') and the noun *yēšū'ā* ('help', 'salvation', 'deliverance', 'victory'), from the Hebrew root *yš'* [יָשַׁע], speak of the presence and action of YHWH who answers our cry for help and who comes powerfully to his people to help them 'in time of distress' (Sirach 2:11).

The accent is on YHWH's bringing divine help (peace, health, victory, forgiveness, life) to us in our difficulties, not on his protecting us from having to face them. The classical text is Exodus 14, which describes the action of YHWH at the Red Sea.

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to YHWH ... Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the *salvation* that YHWH will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. YHWH will fight for you, and you have only to keep still ... Thus YHWH *saved* Israel that day from the Egyptians.

– Exodus 14:10, 13-14,30

The prophet Jeremiah lived through the disaster of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Yet he could write (Jeremiah 31:7):

Thus says YHWH: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,  
and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;  
proclaim, give praise, and say, 'Save, YHWH, your people, the remnant of Israel.'

Isaiah writes (52:7, 10):

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,  
who brings good news, who announces *salvation*, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns'  
... All the ends of the earth shall see the *saving help* of our God.

## Salvation

He recognises the universal scope of YHWH's love:

Turn to me and be *saved*, all the ends of the earth!  
For I am God, and there is no other.

– Isaiah 45:22

The *salvation* of the righteous is from YHWH;  
he is their refuge in the time of trouble.

– Psalm 37:39

YHWH helps them and rescues them;  
he rescues them from the wicked, and *saves* them,  
because they take refuge in him.

– Psalm 37:40

YHWH is near to all who call on him,  
to all who call on him in truth.  
He fulfils the desire of all who fear him;  
he also hears their cry, and *saves* them.

– Psalm 145:18-19

Many personal names in the Bible derive from this word. Those most commonly known are Joshua, Elisha, Isaiah and Hosea. It is significant that the name 'Jesus' (Ben Sira's personal name; see Foreword verse 3) also derives from this root, being the Greek rendition of Joshua. From the same root comes the word 'Hosanna' (Matthew 21:9; John 12:13) – a cry to YHWH to come to our aid.

Since YHWH is a 'saving God' we should cry to him in our distress, trusting that he hears our cry and will come to aid us. Remembering the ways in which YHWH has responded in the past brings peace and joy in the knowledge that, whatever our sufferings, YHWH will save us. YHWH is the one who brings ultimate (eschatological) salvation.

Jesus went through a terrible death. God did not intervene to protect him from it, but God did raise him to himself. Obviously God does not intervene to ward off the terrible consequences of the cosmic condition or of human sin. But the Christian knows that God is always present with powerful grace, and that whatever may happen to us, God's will is to raise everyone to be with Jesus forever. If we welcome this grace, we, too, will be raised to eternal life. This was Paul's message at the beginning of his first missionary journey:

You descendants of Abraham's family, and others who fear God, to us the message of this *salvation* has been sent.

– Acts 13:26

Luke concludes Paul's preaching in Rome with the same message:

Let it be known to you then that this *salvation* of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.

– Acts 28:28



In verse 12 Ben Sira is referring to those who have lost trust in the way revealed by YHWH in the Torah (mentioned for the first time by Ben Sira in verse 16). They think they can walk ‘a double path’, identifying with their Jewish brothers and sisters, but at the same time embracing the contrary values of Hellenism. Having drifted from ‘the fear of the Lord’, their hearts are ‘fearful’, unsure, pulled in every direction (see 1:28). The Psalmist prays:

Make me to know your ways, YHWH;  
teach me your paths.

– Psalm 25:4

Having lost trust in God (verse 13; see 2:6-10), they have lost their security. They cannot hope to avoid the consequences of their actions. They must stand before the judgment seat of the just judge. Verse 15 echoes an earlier statement:

Do not disobey the fear of the Lord;  
do not approach him with a divided mind.

– Sirach 1:28

Ben Sira speaks of those who ‘love’ [Greek: ἀγαπᾶν] YHWH; that is to say, those who are faithful to God’s covenant with them.

I will take you for my wife forever; I will  
take you for my wife in righteousness and in  
justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will  
take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you  
shall know YHWH.

– Hosea 2:19-20

Clearly, for Ben Sira to fear YHWH and to love YHWH are two ways of saying the same thing. If they are looking for meaning in their lives, and values to live by, Judaism has it all. The Torah will fill their hearts and satisfy all their longings.

Humility (verse 17) is the joyful recognition of the truth that we are totally dependent upon God, and God can be totally trusted to be faithful to the love he has promised. He will fill all our needs (see Sirach 3:18; 7:17; 18:21). To ‘fall into the hands of YHWH’ is a beautiful way of speaking of trust. The ‘name’ (verse 18) is raḥūm (‘the Merciful One’; see 50:19 and the texts on page 27).

**<sup>12</sup>Woe to fearful hearts  
and slack hands,  
to the sinner who walks  
a double path!**

**<sup>13</sup>Woe to the fainthearted  
who have no trust!  
They will have no shelter.**

**<sup>14</sup>Woe to you who have  
lost hope!  
What will you do when  
YHWH’s reckoning comes?**

**<sup>15</sup>Those who fear YHWH  
do not disobey his words;  
those who love him  
keep his ways.**

**<sup>16</sup>Those who fear YHWH  
seek to please him,  
those who love him  
are filled with his law.**

**<sup>17</sup>Those who fear YHWH  
prepare their hearts.  
They who fear YHWH  
and bow themselves down  
in his presence.**

**<sup>18</sup>Let us fall into the hands  
of YHWH, but not  
into the hands of humans;  
for equal to his majesty  
is his mercy,  
and equal to his name  
are his works.**

Honouring one's parents

**<sup>1</sup>Children, pay heed to a father's authority;  
act accordingly, so that you may be saved.**

**<sup>2</sup>For the Lord honours a father over his children;  
he confirms a mother's judgment over her children.**

**<sup>3</sup>Those who honour their father atone for sins;**

**<sup>4</sup>those who respect their mother store up treasures.**

**<sup>5</sup>Those who honour their father will have joy in their own children;  
when they pray they will be heard.**

**<sup>6</sup>Those who respect their father will live a long life;  
those who honour their mother obey the Lord.**

To this point the focus has been on our relationship to God. Ben Sira turns now to the home, where children first learn to know and love God according to the sacred traditions handed down from one generation to the next.

To love and fear the Lord, one must love and honour one's parents and care for them when they are in need. This is the first commandment to which a promise is attached:

Honour your father and your mother,  
as YHWH your God commanded you,  
so that your days may be long and that  
it may go well with you in the land  
that YHWH your God is giving you.

– Deuteronomy 5:16

We looked at the meaning of 'sin' in commenting on Sirach 2:11. Here in verse 3, Ben Sira states that those who honour their father 'atone for sins'. 'Atone' translates the Greek: ἐξιλάσκεσθαι, which in turn translates the Hebrew kpr [כפר]. It means 'to cover'. A special instance of this is on the Day of Atonement when the high priest enters the Holy of Holies and approaches the 'mercy-seat', the golden 'cover' [Hebrew kapōret, כַּפֹּרֶת; Greek: ἱλαστήριον] of the ark, the throne of God's invisible presence. He carries with him the sins of the people. Sin cannot be in the presence of God. So, brought to the 'cover', sins are consumed in the fire of God's merciful forgiveness.

In the Newer Testament John speaks of Jesus as 'the atoning sacrifice [Greek: ἱλασμος] for our sins' (1John 2:2).

Verse 6 repeats the teaching of Deuteronomy 5:16. The original Hebrew text for verse 6 and the rest of chapter 3 was found in the geniza (the storeroom for discarded manuscripts) of the Cairo synagogue (see page 10).

The Book of Proverbs speaks of the joy parents experience from the respect shown them by their children:

A wise child makes a glad father;  
a foolish child is a mother's grief.

– Proverbs 10:1

A wise child makes a glad father;  
the foolish despise their mothers.

– Proverbs 15:20

The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice; he who begets a wise son will be glad in him. Let your father and mother be glad; let her who bore you rejoice.

– Proverbs 23:24-25

A child who loves wisdom makes a parent glad.

– Proverbs 29:3

YHWH is the source of all blessing.

O save your people, and bless your heritage; be their shepherd, and carry them forever.

– Psalm 28:9

May YHWH give strength to his people! May YHWH bless his people with peace!

– Psalm 29:11

May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him.

– Psalm 67:7

When a father or mother 'blesses' a child it is an expression of a prayer that YHWH will pour out his grace upon them.

The opposite to 'bless' is 'curse'. To curse someone is to want them cut them off from communion, and so from God's blessing.

The image of a 'root' (verse 9) recalls Paul's prayer that we be 'rooted in love' (Ephesians 3:17), and that our roots may draw life from Christ (Colossians 2:7).

**<sup>7</sup>Those who fear the Lord  
honour their father;  
they serve their parents  
as their masters.**

**<sup>8</sup>Honour your father in word  
and deed,  
that his blessing may come  
upon you.**

**<sup>9</sup>For a father's blessing give a family  
strong roots,  
a mother's curse uproots the  
growing plant.**

Caring for one's aged parents

**<sup>10</sup>Do not take glory in your father's disgrace.**

**his dishonour is no glory to you.**

**<sup>11</sup>The glory of one's father is one's own glory;**

**they multiply sin who demean their mother.**

**<sup>12</sup>My son, be steadfast in honouring you father;**

**do not grieve him as long as he lives.**

**<sup>13</sup>Even if his mind fails him be considerate of him;**

**Do not despise him when you are in the fulness of your strength.**

**<sup>14</sup>For taking care of a father will not be forgotten;**

**it will weigh against your sin; it will take lasting root.**

**<sup>15</sup>In the day of your distress it will be remembered in your favour;**

**like frost in fair weather, your sins will melt away.**

**<sup>16</sup>Whoever forsakes a father is a blasphemer;**

**whoever puts his mother down provokes God.**

Verses 10-11 draw on the Book of Proverbs:

Listen to your father who begot you,  
and do not despise your mother when  
she is old.

– Proverbs 23:22

Dishonouring one's parents is dishonouring God. It will not go unpunished:

The eye that mocks a father and scorns  
to obey a mother will be pecked out by  
the ravens of the valley and eaten by  
the vultures.

– Proverbs 30:17

Ben Sira concludes this section by instructing children to care for their parents when their parents have grown old and feeble and depend upon their care.

'Taking care of' (verse 14) translates the Greek *eleēmosunē* ; ἐλεημοσύνη ; which here translates the Hebrew *š'dāqâ* ; שְׂדָאָה (שְׂדָאָה). It is an act of kindness. It is also what justice requires.

Reading verse 15 we are reminded of one of the beatitudes pronounced by Jesus:

Blessed are the merciful, for they will  
receive mercy.

– Matthew 5:7

In verse 16 Ben Sira reminds the reader that to turn one's back on one's parent is to turn away from God, and provoke God to anger and punishment (see 1:21; and commentary on pages 19-22).

If you curse father or mother, your  
lamp will go out in utter darkness.

– Proverbs 20:20

God said, 'Honour your father and  
your mother,' and, 'Whoever speaks  
evil of father or mother must surely  
die.'

– Matthew 15:4 (see Exodus 21:17)

Two connected virtues are encouraged in verses 17-20. Ben Sira exhorts his students to be gentle (Greek: *πραΰτης*) in the way they conduct themselves. He goes on to exhort them not to lord it over others but to be humble (Greek: *ταπεινω*).

*πραΰτης* occurs rarely in the Older Testament Septuagint Version. We met it is Sirach 1:27, and will find it four more times in Sirach:

Give a hearing to the poor, and return their greeting *gently*.  
– Sirach 4:8

My son, honour your soul  
by acting *gently*.  
– Sirach 10:28

If mercy and *gentleness* characterise a woman's speech, how fortunate her husband is among men.  
– Sirach 36:28

Echoing Numbers 12:3, Ben Sira speaks of Moses:

Out of all mankind God chose him for his trustworthiness and *gentleness*.  
– Sirach 45:4

Otherwise it occurs only in three psalms. In Psalm 45:4 the Psalmist speaks of key qualities expected of the king: Fidelity, gentleness and justice. In the Septuagint Version of Psalm 90:10, the Psalmist speaks of the sufferings of life that teach us to be gentle; and in the Septuagint Version of Psalm 132:1 the Psalmist praises David's gentleness.

It is found more frequently in the Newer Testament, as it was such a notable quality of Jesus, who was 'gentle and humble in heart' (Matthew 11:29). This comes immediately after a text which echoes Sirach 3:19. Jesus thanks his Father:

because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.

– Matthew 11:25

Paul speaks of Jesus' gentleness (1Corinthians 10:1) and exhorts his fellow Christians to imitate Jesus in this (see Galatians 5:23; 6:1; Colossians 3:12; Ephesians 4:2; Titus 3:2; 2Timothy 2:25; see 1Peter 3:16). James links gentleness with wisdom (see James 3:13).

**<sup>17</sup>My son, carry out your tasks with gentleness; then you will be loved more than one who gives gifts.**

**<sup>18</sup>The more you humble yourself; the greater you are, and you will find favour in the sight of the Lord.**

**<sup>19</sup>Many are the lofty and the noble, but he reveals his plan to the humble.**

**<sup>20</sup>For great is the might of the Lord; but by the humble he is glorified.**

The Greek word frequently translated ‘humble’ is *tapeinos* [ταπεινός]. It denotes being ‘low’, as distinct from being high. As we will note shortly it is not as rich as the virtue we are accustomed to speak of as ‘humility’. Taking up a low position (being ‘lowly’) is recommended among the values encouraged in the Hellenistic world, but only in one’s relationship with the gods. To refuse to accept our lowly condition in our relations with the gods is to fall into the vice of pride (*hubris*; ὕβρις). There are even times when it is considered sensible and virtuous to put oneself in a low position in relation to other people, but only when fate has so ordained. However, being in a low state is, in the understanding of the Greeks, undesirable, and to be reduced to such a state by others or by the gods is to suffer an evil fate.

The Septuagint (the Greek Version of the Older Testament) mirrors non-Biblical Greek usage, with one important qualification which reflects Israel’s understanding of itself as a religious people born out of the Exodus event. Central to Israel’s self-understanding is that God has redeemed them from their ‘low’ condition in Egypt. While being ‘low’ has no value in itself, it does attract God’s compassionate love, and so it does hold out hope for redemption. The following text from Isaiah is typical:

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his *lowly* ones [*tapeinos*].

– Isaiah 49:13

Ben Sira recommends taking up a lowly position [Greek: *tapeinoō* ; ταπεινῶω] before God:

They who fear the Lord keep their hearts prepared and *bow themselves down* (*tapeinoō*) in his presence.

– Sirach 2:17

He repeats the idea in the text upon which we are now commenting (3:18, 20), and it is a theme to which he will frequently return. He speaks of the human experience of being in a low position (see 6:12; 13:8; 25:23; 34:31; 40:3), something that the proud abhor (see 13:20). Even one’s ‘friends’ don’t like associating with us when we are brought low (see 13:21-22). God is the one who reduces people to a low state (7:11; 10:15; 33:12). Ben Sira advises his students to take a low position (see 7:17), especially in relation to God (see 18:21; 35:21), but also when in the presence of important people (see 4:7; 29:5). They should care for those who are lowly (see 12:5; 29:8). At the same time they must not be taken in by those who assume a lowly position, but for their own advantage (see 12:11).

There is wisdom in taking a low position, and it will be rewarded (see 11:1).

The wisdom of the *lowly* lifts their heads high, and seats them among the great.

– Sirach 11:1 (see Proverbs 11:2)

God hears the prayer of the lowly:

The prayer of the *lowly* pierces the clouds, and it will not rest until it reaches its goal; it will not desist until the Most High responds.

– Sirach 35:21

The Book of Proverbs speaks of the virtue of being lowly:

YHWH favours the lowly.

– Proverbs 3:34

Wisdom is with the lowly.

– Proverbs 11:2

It is better to be told, “Come up here,” than to be put lower in the presence of a dignitary

– Proverbs 25:7

The Newer Testament, like Sirach, calls upon people to ‘lower themselves’ before God. Recall the statement of Jesus:

Those who exalt themselves will be brought low, and those who humble themselves [*tapeinoō*] will be exalted.

– Matthew 23:12 (compare James 4: 10; 1Peter 5:5-6)

There are two texts in the Septuagint that go further. The first is in the Book of Proverbs which speaks of being ‘lowly in spirit’ (Greek: *ταπεινόφρων*).

A person’s pride will bring humiliation, but one who is *lowly in spirit* will obtain honour. YHWH favours the humble

– Proverbs 29:23

This adds the idea of being low in one’s thinking (Greek: *φρην*) about oneself, and Proverbs 29:23 is the only example of its use in the Septuagint.

The related verb (*tapeinophroneō*) also occurs once, and only once, in the Septuagint, in a text which is echoed in Sirach 3:18-24.

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But *I think of myself humbly* [The Hebrew text has ‘I have calmed’] and have quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and for evermore.

– Psalm 131

Greek moral philosophy, outside the Bible, has no place for ‘*thinking* of oneself as low’. As already noted, in the Greek and Roman world it was considered a virtue to recognise one’s low position in regard to the gods; and it was right not to exaggerate one’s own importance or to strive beyond one’s fate. But the self held a central place in their ethics, for they thought of their individual nature as sharing in the divinity. The divine in each person was thought of as identified with the self. It was important, therefore, to recognise and respect one’s self, and not to think of oneself in a servile way.

In the Newer Testament, Saint Paul penetrates more deeply into what it means to be humble. He frequently exhorts us to clothe ourselves in Christ. An especially beautiful text is in his Letter to the Colossians 3:12-15, where he speaks of clothing oneself in compassion, kindness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace, gratitude (and he adds the two virtues mentioned by Ben Sira, 3:17-12), gentleness and humility. Paul appears to have invented the word translated ‘humility’ here (Greek: *tapeinophrosunē*, *ταπεινόφροσυνη*), for it does not occur in the Greek language prior to Paul.

## Humility

Shortly after Paul we find *tapeinophrosunē* being used by Plutarch, Epictetus and Josephus, but denoting something very different from the meaning given it by Paul. For these Greek writers it is always a vice, never a virtue, and is best translated ‘small-minded’ or ‘mean-spirited’. It is the equivalent of having a low self-esteem, and is an abomination in the thinking of Greek moralists. ‘Humility’ in the full sense intended by Paul is a new virtue, a specifically Christian virtue, because of the new way it was lived by Jesus. The following scene from the Gospel recalls Psalm 131:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Whoever *lowers* himself [tapeinoō ; Greek ταπεινωω] like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

– Matthew 18:1-4

The little child is offered as a symbol of humility for it beautifully captures Jesus’ own childlike trust in the God whom he calls ‘Abba! Father!’ He wants his disciples to have a heart that is humble like his (Matthew 11:29). Because Jesus looked up to God in loving trust, he was able to look up to everyone, delighting in people with the delight that belongs to the innocence of childhood and experiencing it as a privilege to serve them.

‘Thinking of oneself as low’ (or ‘humility’) is an attitude of mind and heart that recognises oneself as God’s child, sharing the life of his Son, and therefore as living in total dependence on God. The humble person delights in this dependence, knowing that God is a Father and can be absolutely counted on as a source of life, love and hope. For the Christian the divine Spirit which sanctifies the self is not identical with it but is the Spirit of Christ: ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me’ (Galatians 2:20). To know how to obey the divine will, Christians do not look to their own nature and strive to act accordingly. Rather, they listen attentively to the call of the Lord, and strive to be obedient to one in whose wisdom and love they trust.

The highest freedom experienced by disciples of Christ is to be his slave, to allow him to live in us and to find in the freedom given by Christ an opportunity to be ‘through love, slaves of one another’ (Galatians 5:13). Christians experience a radical and liberating change of perspective: ‘If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation’ (2 Corinthians 5:17). In this new creature, humility is a basic virtue. Everything now is possible, not for the one who is most self-sufficient, but ‘for one who believes’ (Mark 9:24). The self is no less important, but perfection for the self is a flowering of the gifts of the Spirit, and the way to this perfection is in self-giving, after the example of Jesus, and by the power of his Spirit. ‘Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it’ (Luke 17:33). Humility as a Christian virtue is a sharing in the life of Jesus, the child of God, and in the intimacy of his trust in his Father. Paul believes that it is Christ who is living in him and in the Christians of Colossae. He wants them to let this special trusting dependence that Christ has in relation to his Father find expression in their lives too. Then they would have no difficulty in looking up to others, delighting in their gifts, looking after their interests. Humility for a disciple of Christ has nothing to do with belittling self. It is the recognition of oneself as a child of God and a trust that one’s self will be created by God’s love.



It is worth repeating Psalm 131 here:

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But *I think of myself humbly* and have quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and for evermore.

Qoheleth, too, is unhappy with the human propensity to want to understand everything with our over-rated reasoning powers. He has the great Solomon, noted for his wisdom, bemoaning his fate:

I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with.

– Ecclesiastes 1:12-13

I said, “I will be wise,” but it was far from me. That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?

– Ecclesiastes 7:23-24

Ben Sira is warning his students against the claims of the Greeks, and the attraction of the knowledge of which they boast. For him, true wisdom, ‘more than you can understand’ has been revealed by God, and nowhere more fully than in the Torah. Instead of over-reaching themselves in attempting to follow the ‘misleading speculations’ (verse 24) of the Hellenists, which are not their concern, they should humble themselves before God, ‘attend to what has been committed to them’ in God’s revelation, and humbly obey God’s will. That is the path of true wisdom.

**<sup>21</sup>Do not seek what is too sublime for you,  
do not investigate what is beyond your power.**

**<sup>22</sup>Attend to what has been committed to you,  
for what is hidden is not your concern.**

**<sup>23</sup>Do not meddle in matters that are beyond you,  
for more than you can understand has been shown you.**

**<sup>24</sup>For long is the list of human speculations –  
evil and misleading fancies!**

A wise heart

**<sup>25</sup>Without eyes there is no light;  
without knowledge there is no  
wisdom.**

**<sup>26</sup>Those whose hearts are hardened  
will fare badly in the end,  
and whoever loves danger  
will perish in it.**

**<sup>27</sup>Those whose hearts are hardened  
will be burdened by troubles;  
the sinner adds sin to sin.**

**<sup>28</sup>When calamity befalls the  
arrogant, there is no healing,  
he is the offshoot of an evil plant.**

**<sup>29</sup>A wise heart appreciates  
proverbs,  
to the attentive ear wisdom is  
a delight.**

Thanks to the discovery made in the Cairo synagogue we have the Hebrew text of this passage. 'Knowledge' in verse 25 translates the Hebrew da'at [דַּאֲתַ]. It is not just a matter of insight and reason. It implies acting on one's knowledge. Without this there is no wisdom.

The Pharaoh of Egypt in the Moses' story had a 'hardened heart' (verses 26-27; Greek: καρδία σκληρά; see Exodus 4:21). It is the opposite of a listening (obedient) heart. Hardened against the inspiration of God it can issue only in disaster.

Verse 27 adds the insight that the more we sin, the more we burden ourselves with sin's consequences.

Wisdom literature has a lot to say about the 'arrogant' [verse 28; Hebrew: lēš; לֵשׁ]. It is the opposite of the humble (see 3:18-20).

YHWH resists the arrogant;  
to the humble he shows favour.

– Proverbs 3:34

A sensible son listens to his father;  
an arrogant son is heading for destruction.

– Proverbs 13:1

The arrogant do not like to be corrected;  
they will not associate with the wise.

– Proverbs 15:12

A 'wise heart' (see also Proverbs 10:8; 16:21; Job 9:4) is a heart that is attentive to wisdom (see Proverbs 2:2), and 'heeds wholesome correction' (Proverbs 15:31).

We met the word 'proverb' (Greek: parabolē; παραβολή; Hebrew māšāl, מָשָׁל) in Sirach 1:25. It covers a wide range of literary genres. Essentially it is a saying that involves the use of metaphor or simile. It says one thing, inviting the reader to apply the truth to other situations ('A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush').

‘Almsgiving’ (verse 30) translates the Greek *eleēmosunē* ; ἐλεημοσύνη; which here translates the Hebrew *šēdāqâ* ; טְדָאָה. In 3:14 we translated it ‘taking care of’. It covers every expression of mercy shown to another. Ben Sira often speaks of it (see 7:10; 12:3). Speaking of God he writes:

He makes room for every *act of mercy*.

– Sirach 16:14

*Almsgiving* is like a signet ring with the Lord, and he will keep a person’s kindness like the apple of his eye.

– Sirach 17:22

How great is the *mercy* of the Lord, and his forgiveness for those who return to him!

– Sirach 17:29

We, too, are to be generous in acts of kindness:

Be patient with someone in humble circumstances, and do not keep him waiting for your *alms*.

– Sirach 29:8

Store up *almsgiving* in your treasury, and it will rescue you from every disaster.

– Sirach 29:12

His prosperity will be established, and the assembly will proclaim his *acts of charity*.

– Sirach 31:11

Kindness is like a garden of blessings, and *almsgiving* endures forever.

– Sirach 40:17

Kindred and helpers are for a time of trouble, but *almsgiving* rescues better than either.

– Sirach 40:24

It is a theme developed in the Book of Tobit (see Tobit 4:7-11).

On atonement for sin see Sirach 3:3.

‘Kindness’ (verse 31 translates the Greek *charis* [χάρις], which here translates the Hebrew *ṭôb* [טוֹב; ‘good’]. Acts of kindness bring their own reward (compare Tobit 14:10-11).

<sup>30</sup>**As water extinguishes a blazing fire, so almsgiving atones for sin.**

<sup>31</sup>**The kindness you have done will cross your path as you journey; when you fall you will find support.**

Care for the poor

<sup>4:1</sup>**My son, do not mock the life  
of the poor,  
or keep needy eyes waiting.**  
<sup>2</sup>**Do not grieve the hungry,  
or ignore the downtrodden.**  
<sup>3</sup>**Do not add to the troubles of  
the oppressed,  
or delay giving to the needy.**  
<sup>4</sup>**Do not reject a suppliant  
in distress,  
or turn your face away from  
the poor.**  
<sup>5</sup>**Do not avert your eye from  
the needy,  
and give no one reason to  
curse you;**  
<sup>6</sup>**for if in bitterness of soul  
he should curse you,  
his Creator will hear  
his prayer.**

Verse 1 draws on Proverbs:

Those who mock the poor insult their Maker.

– Proverbs 17:5

The lesson is repeated later:

Be patient with someone in humble circumstances, and do not keep him waiting for your alms.

– Sirach 29:8

Verse 2, compare:

Give food to the hungry, and clothing to the naked. Give all your surplus as alms, and do not let your eye begrudge your giving of alms.

– Tobit 4:16

Verse 3, compare:

Do not say to your neighbour, “Go, and come back, tomorrow I will give it” — when you have it with you.

– Proverbs 3:28

Verses 4-6, compare Psalm 22:24.

YHWH did not hide his face from me, but heard me when I cried to him.

The Hebrew Bible has a rich vocabulary to speak of the ‘poor’. Amos speaks out against those who:

sell the needy [Greek: *ponos* ; *πόνος* ; Hebrew: *ebyōn* ; *עִבְיֹן*] for a pair of sandals, who trample the head of the poor [Greek: *ptōchos* ; *πτωχός* ; Hebrew: *dalīm* ; *דָּלִים*] into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted [Greek: *tapeinos* ; *ταπεινός* ; Hebrew: *‘anāwīm* ; *עֲנָוִים*] out of the way.

– Amos 2:6-7

Other words to translate *‘ebyōn* (‘needy’) are the beggar, powerless, needy, hungry, thirsty, paralysed, blind, deaf, lonely, last-in-the-line, without-a-voice, redundant.

The *dalīm* (‘poor’) are the hard-working country folk who have no say in the laws produced in the city.

The *‘anāwīm* are the stooped, oppressed, trodden down, deserted, deprived, outcast, despised, cast-aside, humiliated, roughly-treated, burdened, yoked, trapped, crushed by the blows of chronic misery.

Ben Sira exhorts his students to be pleasant to those they encounter in the 'congregation' [see 1:30; Greek synagogue; συναγωγή ; Hebrew 'ēdâ ; אֵדָוָה].

In verse 7 he speaks of the leaders of the synagogue: the council of the elders. This council later became the Sanhedrin.

In verses 8-10 he speaks of those who have a special place in the heart of God: the poor [πτωχος/'anāwîm], those being treated unjustly, the orphans, and the widows.

God gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity.

– Psalm 68:6

Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

– Isaiah 1:17

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry.

– Exodus 22:21-23 (see Deut. 24:17-21)

Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked."

– Psalm 82:3-4

For likening God's love to that of a mother, see:

Can a woman forget the child on her breast, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.

– Isaiah 49:15

As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.

– Isaiah 66:13

**<sup>7</sup>Endear yourself to the congregation;  
bow your head low to the leaders.**

**<sup>8</sup>Give a hearing to the poor,  
and return their greeting gently.**

**<sup>9</sup>Rescue those suffering injustice  
from their oppressors;  
and do not be hesitant in giving  
a verdict.**

**<sup>10</sup>Be a father to orphans,  
and be like a husband to their  
mother;  
you will then be like a son of the  
Most High,  
and he will love you more than  
does your mother.**

