

The First Foot Forward in Scripture Selection?

Snowflakes: The Common Ground of God's Wisdom

by Rick Leatherwood

"As the rain and snow fall from heaven and water the earth, causing it to bear and sprout ... so My word will not return empty, but will accomplish all that I send it to do." Isaiah 55:10-11

Today, most of the world's unreached people live in an area called the 10/40 Window. These people are of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. The question we all have is, What do we need to do to reach these people? The answer? We have to find some *common ground*. Interestingly, what we are finding is that of all the sixty-six books of the Bible, the book of Proverbs, the wisdom of God, is common ground to all people.

Proverbs is practical and its principles relevant to everyone. Within a few verses on any page, the text starts to engage the reader concerning something happening in their life right at that moment. Proverbs is common ground.

There are many good missionaries on the mission fields of the world today. And there is excellent seed, such as the JESUS film and the New Testament in local languages. But there is also a lot of hard ground. However, when the book of Proverbs is taken out from between Psalms and Ecclesiastes and appropriately packaged as its own booklet, God's wisdom is able to function like a plow, breaking up the hardness in an unbeliever's heart and softening it through wisdom, so that the truth of the gospel can penetrate and sprout. Everyone wants a harvest, but any farmer will tell us that if we want to harvest, we'll have to plant; and before we plant, we'll need to plow. *As plowing enables soil to receive seed, so God's wisdom opens the heart.* "He who tills his land will have an abundant harvest" Proverbs 12:11.

And yet, current mission strategy in critical parts of the world still seems somewhat piecemeal, rather than comprehensive and strategic. As a result, new believers come in ones and twos—mostly ones—and pretty sporadically at that. This situation is unlikely to change if current evangelistic practices of presenting the gospel continue. But *movement* is what the Lord wants to see happen: "By Myself I have sworn says the Lord . . . I will greatly multiply your seed . . . and in your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed." Genesis 22:16-18.

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Thanks to the research done by Ralph Winter, and the vision that he began to articulate of what still needs to happen to finish the task of world evangelization, we have been studying and participating in the world Christian movement for about 30 years now. This has stirred the missionary enterprise to penetrate into many of the remaining fields and to apply church growth principles that have stimulated tremendous expansion in those fields.

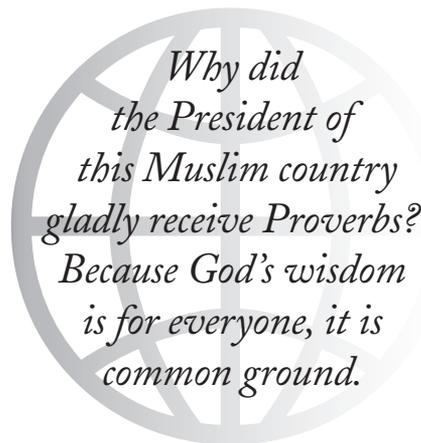
The Abrahamic Covenant revealed the heart of God 4000 years ago. The implication for us today is clear: As far as the Lord is concerned, a harvest is not a piece of grain here, and a piece of fruit there. A harvest is measured in bushels. And Jesus spoke of harvest!

Now a harvest involves a strategy. The land must first be cleared, tree roots and boulders removed, and then the land plowed, after which we must plant and possibly irrigate. Then by the grace of God and a little sun, there will be a harvest. Project Snowflakes is designed to work towards producing harvest conditions by promoting and implementing a necessary step that has often been overlooked, that of plowing. Is it possible to plow the entire 10/40 Window? I don't see why not.

When a booklet of Proverbs was presented to the President of one Central Asian country, he was so impressed in reading it, that he immediately ordered the book developed into a curriculum to be used in their public school system! Here is an example of the potential to plow and prepare a whole country for the gospel. Why did the President of this Muslim nation gladly receive Proverbs? Because God's wisdom is for everyone, it is common ground. Many parts of the Bible would not be considered common ground by Muslims, but they will receive the book of Proverbs. Then, as they read the wisdom of God, it begins its work, touching their souls, softening their hearts, confronting their consciences, and preparing them for the gospel.

The Proper Tool

What do we need to do to reach the unreached? First we have to make contact, and in order for that contact to lead to a connection, there must be substance in it. Tourists can make contact, but there is little substance in their contact. For Kingdom purposes, Proverbs provides both the substance along with the common ground. For as we bring the wisdom of God to people, we are not looking for substance or common ground... we are tactfully establishing the common ground of social substance



that already exists! The wisdom of "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but harsh words stir up anger" (Proverbs 15:1), will be recognized as much by them, as it is by us. Common ground. Agreement. A beginning.

In one country where audiocassettes of Proverbs with excellent indigenous background music are being distributed in the local language, an American missionary got into a taxi that already had the cassette playing. The driver had been given the tape a few days earlier by someone else, and had been listening to it over and over again. He then asked the missionary if this was the word of God? Assured that it was, he said "But this is not trying to force its religion on me." He then asked questions non-stop during the next 20 minutes. When they arrived at the point of destination, the driver turned off the motor and continued the conversation. The missionary was able to share the whole

message of Christ. She later said that in all the years she had been working in this particular country, she had never had such a wide-open opportunity to share the gospel.

The widely used college course, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, has brought—and continues to bring—both the vision of God's unchanging purpose and the awareness of the remaining frontiers to the attention of the Church. As a result, thousands of people are now going out to pioneer mission fields around the world as prayer walkers or members of short-term teams. In the past, resident missionaries have either held their breath as these short-termers invaded their treasured locales, or they would simply leave town to avoid being associated with the short-term team (which was often prone to make unseemly cultural blunders and draw unwanted attention to foreigners engaging in evangelistic activity, thus posing a security threat to those on location long term).

But this need not be the case. The goal of frontier missions is to establish indigenous church-planting movements within each people group. The primary goal of short term workers and prayer walking teams going into an unreached peoples' context should be to further the larger objective of the church plant. But without linguistic skills, how can this happen? Propitiously, prayer walkers do not need to know the local language to be able to hand someone a book of Proverbs that has been translated into that local language. All they need to do is smile, make eye contact, and then hand someone the booklet. If they can say three words in the local language ("This is gift"), so much the better.

In this way, these ardent and sincere young people can have become an integral part of the overall missionary strategy to plant the church among an unreached people by doing some of the vital ministry of plowing on the earth, as well as warring in the heavenlies. This enables them to become a part of the total picture, which will enhance

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their experience with God as they pray, and increase their understanding of frontier missions. By sharing the wisdom of God, prayer walkers and short-term teams establish common ground in the local community and are perceived as to be a blessing by both the community and the resident missionaries. They are no longer there just for “their” experience. They now become part of the whole process of planting the church among these people. Let’s walk, pray, and be the blessing on the earth God has called us to be by handing someone we meet a booklet of His wisdom. Again I suggest and hope you begin to see the possibility of “plowing” the whole 10/40 Window!

In India, among the more than 220 million speakers of Bengali, the book of Proverbs is finding a warm welcome. Readers write back saying that whereas previously they had trusted in their knowledge gained at university to get them through life, they now understand that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The wisdom of God in Proverbs is not the end—everyone must come to the cross—but it is a place to begin. And getting someone from zero to one is that crucial first step towards eternal life.

Though Hindu people have also heard of Solomon, Muslim people in particular know of him because he is mentioned in the Koran, so that in receiving a book of Proverbs, a man from Azerbaijan said, “I’ve heard of Solomon all of my life, but I have never read the words of Solomon.” This would be true for essentially all Muslims. And so they have a natural curiosity about Solomon’s writings. This common link opens the way for God’s wisdom to be shared—without offence—with everyone in Islam, from shop keepers, school teachers, bankers, and businessmen to religious and government leaders. In giving

them the book of Proverbs, we are not trying to convert them as they fear, rather we want to bless them. And as we bless them, they become more and more open and receptive to hearing what we have to say. Again, the wisdom of God in Proverbs is not the end, it is the beginning, the common ground that allows contact from which we can build relationships.

As followers of Christ we have come to understand the love of God, but Muslims may not fully fathom this love. Proverbs says God hates the shedding of innocent blood. A few people in the world need to hear that today. So by sharing God’s wisdom with Muslims, we are helping them come to understand the true character and nature of Allah (Please know that *Allah* is simply the Arabic word for God, a word used by Arab Christians 600 years before Islam). While Arab Christians know the true character of Allah, most Arab Muslims do not. There are extraordinary and fundamental differences between the Koran and the Bible. Muslims have been taught since they were children that the Messiah did not die on the cross. Allah would never allow this to happen (in their way of thinking) because they misunderstand the character and nature of God. So the cross is not the place to begin when reaching out to the people of Islam. We begin by establishing common ground through the wisdom of God in Proverbs and, like the snow softening the earth in Isaiah’s prophecy, the wisdom of Allah is allowed to prepare their hearts for the love of Allah. *And so the common ground of God’s wisdom begins to create openings where there were none!*

Using Proverbs in this way is something new. Some mission leaders are ready, and already moving in new creative ways. But others are still stuck in conventional patterns of ministry

that have failed far more than they have succeeded in the past.

I once shared with an organization the rationale for using Proverbs instead of the whole Bible. I was amazed at their lack of vision and failure to understand the religious and human dynamics involved. Yet they seemed determined to forge ahead, convinced they can succeed where so many others have already failed. I couldn’t help thinking, “more good seed on top of hard ground.”

The likelihood of the Bibles mentioned above ever being read by Muslims is almost nil. Why? First of all, a large amount of the Bible’s content is not common ground to Muslims, and they have been pre-conditioned through years of indoctrination not to read it. Secondly, the Bible’s sheer size is a problem. Except for the odd scholar, Arabs are not ardent readers, especially of a book this big.

For the same amount of money it would take to print a few thousand Bibles, we can print 1,000,000 booklets of Proverbs. Such a booklet is small enough that people will read it, and completely inoffensive to the Muslim mind. It is common ground, and will bring immediate blessing to the reader with just a casual reading.

At the end of the day in missions, as in any other venture, you have to move with the movers and let those who refuse to listen to new ideas, wait for another day to find their way out of religious ruts that produce little fruit. Please forgive the brusqueness of this last sentence if you disagree, but there is far too much fruitless activity, loathsome busyness, and wasting of valuable resources by those who should know better. Regrettably, some of these people are sitting on top of large amounts of the Lord’s money. As Jesus said, “New wine needs new wine skins.” And so for the organizations who understand the times, and see the benefit of using God’s wisdom

in a new way and desire to do so, we hope to publish 1,000,000 booklets of Proverbs, and cover Iraq with the wisdom of God. In this way we will prepare the way for Christ to do a new thing in that country, so that one day, people will gladly buy, and then read their own Bible.

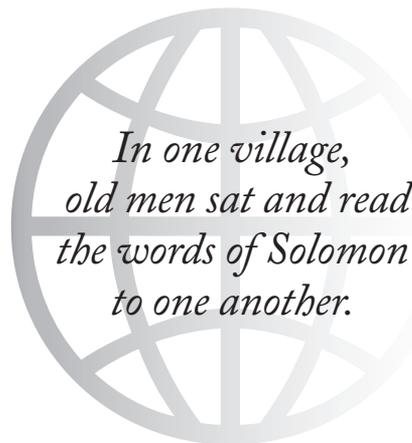
Relief and Development agencies are also looking at how the wisdom of God in Proverbs can fit into the overall scheme of rebuilding people's lives. If we only come to people with blankets and food, and then bricks and mortar, we simply leave them in a similar situation as they were in before the crisis. For 1400 years Muslims have embraced a worldview that is in direct opposition to the word of God. The bottom line of their business ethic is strictly win/lose. However if people are to truly develop, they must come to the understanding that "a false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is His delight" (Proverbs 11:1), and that history has proved that this is the practice that produces prosperity.

Likewise many Muslims have adopted a work ethic that to dirty one's hands is a dishonor. Again, this totally contradicts the word of God that tells us that work is virtuous and yields its reward. "He who works his land will have abundant food, but the one who chases fantasies will have his fill of poverty." Proverbs 28:19. "All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty." Proverbs 14:23, etc. And so Proverbs provides a safe, yet convicting environment for Muslims to re-examine their lives in light of a portion of God's word that is engaging and which they will receive. Sending refugees home after the crisis is over with a new paradigm based on the wisdom of God, enables them to take a giant step towards a new life in both the social and physical realms, as well as the spiritual.

A Two-Edged Sword

One of the intriguing things about Proverbs is that it is as non-threatening to the giver as it is to the receiver. What do I mean? All over the world, many believers are reticent about getting involved in the work of the

ministry, as they fear the social repercussions of being seen as proselytizing. However, working with Muslims, when one shares Proverbs in a booklet entitled, *The Wisdom from Allah*, and the introduction to that booklet points out that these are the words of the Prophet Suliman from the Zabuur, which he has been instructed by the Koran to read but has never had the opportunity to do so, the giver is not perceived by the recipient as trying to push a strange religion. Instead, the benefactor is warmly thanked for giving such a gift.



This kind of welcome creates an extremely important dynamic! In one village old men sat and read the words of Solomon to one another. Since a number of verses in Proverbs relate to marriage, God's wisdom was consequently read at a wedding. A significant step towards cultivating the climate for a movement has been established in this community. Followers of Christ were subsequently viewed favorably, and all of this came about because ordinary believers are not afraid to hand out Proverbs in an informal, natural, and relaxed way.

This relaxed way is very important. Proverbs should not be treated as a tract to be handed out randomly to anyone and everyone passing by. That is like building with wood, hay, and stubble. What the Lord wants is for His people to participate with Him. When that happens, the booklet will not end up in a trash can simply

because it was given robotically instead of personally.

We should be seeking to work together with God. This is His world and His mission. We can trust Him to bring across our path in the normal, natural flow of life people whom He has prepared to receive the book. It can happen anywhere at anytime: in a shop, or at the market, the pharmacy, the cleaners, the post office, the bank, a social gathering, or after a business meeting. The key is to have a booklet with us at all times, in our coat pocket or purse, backpack or briefcase. Then, as the Lord brings people across our path in the course of the day (which He will surely do), and it comes time to take our leave, instead of simply saying thank you and goodbye, we can make eye contact, smile, and hand the teller, clerk, shop keeper, waiter, hawker or driver, a little booklet of the wisdom of God. In this way, we are building with gold, silver, and precious jewels because we are working together with God! He has brought us together with the receiver, because He is at work in each of our lives. He desires that none should perish and longs to bring the unbeliever into a relationship with Himself. He is also at work in the believer's life, conforming us into the image of Jesus Christ.

And so Proverbs acts like a two-edged sword, as a tool to bless unbelievers with the wisdom of God and prepare their hearts to meet the Lord, and as a tool that activates church members, who may have often longed to do something, but didn't know how, didn't have the right tool, and therefore simply didn't do anything. Proverbs now blesses them, as they likewise begin to read God's wisdom each day, and exercise the less than arduous discipline of remembering to carry a small booklet about the size of a passport with them to hand to people they meet.

I shared this vision with Dr. Paul Cedar, international director of the Lausanne Committee for World

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Evangelization and also director of Mission America. As we drank our coffee, Dr. Cedar quickly saw the potential of what I was saying, shook his head, and said, "Why haven't we thought of this before? It is so simple that anyone can do it." In a moment of time he understood that this project could work anywhere in the world, from Jakarta to Khartoum, from Calcutta to Kabul, and from Baghdad to Algiers . . . even from Moscow to Montreal, Boston, Pasadena, Quito or Tokyo. And this of course is exactly what God wants, for "He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, *to equip the saints for the work of ministry.*" Not some of the saints mind you, nor the super saints who may come to mind. The clear meaning of Ephesians 4:11-12, is that God wants his people—all of us—to be equipped to work together with Him in seeking for and reaching the lost.

Right now, as you sit reading this article, imagine how many opportunities are being missed all over the world at this very moment, simply because followers of Christ do not have a booklet of God's wisdom with them to give to people they meet—profound wisdom that could unlock the unbeliever's mind and heart, a booklet that is not perceived as pushing but rather beckoning them, offering them wisdom, drawing them ever closer to the one who rose from the dead, who while not mentioned by name is nevertheless the very essence of that wisdom! If the saints each gave only five of these booklets away, we would cover the world with the wisdom of God!

I was telling Paul Eshleman, executive director of the JESUS film, this vision about how Proverbs could be a vital pre-evangelistic, ground breaking tool. Suddenly he grasped

the dynamics of what I was saying and interrupted me mid-sentence, exclaiming, "Oh, I like this!" and called a few more people in to listen. Greg Livingstone, founder of Frontiers, Inc., attended a workshop I gave on this initiative. "Rick," he admitted to me afterward, "I came to your workshop out of loyalty to you, but I leave converted to Snowflakes." Katy Barnwell, former International Translation Director for Wycliffe Bible Translators, spent 35 years on the field as one of God's quintessential Bible translators. One day, she listened to me go on about how Proverbs is a pre-evangelistic tool that could be used something like a plow, and how we've not really used it this way before. As I caught my breath she looked at me through sparkling eyes and said, "Rick, this is wonderful."

Finally, my friend and father in mission vision, Ralph Winter, was the first—and continues to be the most stalwart—supporter of Project Snowflakes. He encouraged me to persevere in communicating this concept of using Proverbs in a new way, which for the most part was formerly outside the box of the normal mission paradigm. Increasingly this vision is being welcomed by more and more missionaries and national workers alike who see the value of using a non-threatening portion of Scripture that has the power and necessary substance to break through into a person's consciousness and prepare the way of the Lord. From the moment of Genesis 3:15, when the Lord Himself spoke the first of all prophecies, and announced the coming of the seed of the woman who would crush the devil's head, He spent thousands of years preparing the world for that fullness of time. We need to take a look at what God did, how He has worked in history. We need to understand the

importance of preparation, and follow God's example.

The goal of Snowflakes is to cover the earth with the wisdom of God, believing this will help bring about the favorable conditions for harvest. *Kairos International* has now published booklets of Proverbs that are being used in 27 countries by many different mission agencies, denominations, and individuals. All those who are interested are most welcome to contact us. It is rewarding that Project Snowflakes has the endorsement of mission leaders around the world, but the most important thing is that the book of Proverbs is connecting with unreached peoples, and is doing what we believed it would do in preparing the way for the gospel. Feedback from Muslims, Hindus, and former Buddhists who have read Proverbs, reveals that their hearts were opened through God's wisdom and we have excellent testimonies from missionaries who tell how this little book of the wisdom of God, is paving the way for the gospel to be shared with those who need to hear.

"All the kings of the earth were seeking the presence of Solomon, to hear the wisdom that God had put in his heart." 2 Chronicles 9:23

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