



**“Wisdom Takes Root”**

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Hayward, California**

**Second Sunday After Christmas Day  
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Sirach 24:1-12**

It’s that time of year again—time to make a fearless, moral inventory of your life, identify an area (or two) for self-improvement, and make a resolution (or two) for the New Year.

Or not. It seems more often than not, my friends and family are simply bowing out of the annual rite of kicking off a campaign to change themselves as the clock strikes twelve at the turn of the year.

It’s not that they have all reached their ideal weight, exercise regularly, eat right, spend less, drink less, quit smoking, gotten out of debt, become more organized, learned something new and (whew!), found the perfect job. It’s that they have come to the sad conclusion that New Year’s resolutions aren’t particularly effective.

And science backs them up on this. Recent research shows that while 52 percent of participants in a resolution study were confident of success, only 12 percent actually achieved their goals.<sup>1</sup> A second study found 80 percent of all people fail their New Year’s resolution by Valentine’s Day.<sup>2</sup>

Now, the reasons why people fail are varied. Most of us would chalk our failure up to lack of personal willpower, especially when it comes to stopping ourselves from doing something that is pleasurable (like eating) or starting something that is painful (like exercising). Unfortunately, it seems almost every resolution, if not everything we’d like to change about ourselves, falls into one of these two categories, both of which require effort, sometimes tremendous effort, to stay our hand or get ourselves going. I don’t know about you but sometimes just talking about willpower and effort in the same sentence is exhausting to me.

Many of us have learned from experience that there just isn’t room in our brains or our souls for the additional willpower and effort required to change ourselves. In other words, we have concluded, if we are so unlikely to change, why try? After all, where’s the wisdom in setting yourself up for failure?

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.quirkology.com/UK/Experiment\\_resolution.shtml](http://www.quirkology.com/UK/Experiment_resolution.shtml)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.paulchiu.net/2009/01/new-years-resolution-success-rate.html> (citing New York Times)

## II

Speaking of wisdom, who is this woman who praises herself in today's scripture from the Book of Sirach, telling us of her glorious origin from the mouth of God?

Why, it's none other than Wisdom herself, known to the ancients as the lady Sophia, who appears in the Book of Proverbs and in three books of the Apocrypha (Baruch, Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon). Her Hebrew name is Chokmah and some scholars also see her presence, muted by male-dominated traditions, in the Book of Job, the Psalms, the Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes. All in all, some say that there is more material on Sophia in the Old Testament and the Apocrypha than any other figure except God, Moses, Job, and David.<sup>3</sup>

Who is Sophia and what does scripture tell us of her? According to Proverbs, Sophia was brought forth by God before creation and she was with God when heaven, sky, earth, and the seas were made, acting as his companion and delighting in his creation, including the human race. Sophia is also the order within God's creation, the pattern underlying the mysteries of the natural world. She is the essence of all things; for example, she is the wetness in all forms of water, be it ice, fog, or steam. She is also the gift of knowledge, a fountain of understanding, available to all who seek her. She knows the past and the future and she unites all beings in Love. Sophia calls each and every one of us to know her. She is not silent nor is she invisible. She stands in every doorway, every intersection, every gate, and calls loudly: Listen to me! She's everywhere but you cannot see her if you think only of yourself. She will, if you listen to her, Scripture tells us, bring you reason, understanding, happiness and compassion. She will, if you listen to her, help you abandon cynicism and doubt. She will, if you allow, change you.

Today's scripture from Sirach is taken from what we believe is a textbook for young Jewish men studying how to be successful in the Hellenistic environment two centuries before the birth of Christ, providing advice on etiquette, personal finance and how to raise children and manage a household. The assigned reading for today is a poetic break from the nuts and bolts instruction and provides an opportunity for the author and teacher, Ben Sira, to affirm the earlier Hebrew tradition, found in Proverbs, that Sophia was present at creation and to add his unique thought that Sophia, after dwelling in the assembly of the Most High, traversing the highs and lows of creation, and holding sway over every nation, had been commanded by God to dwell in Israel. In other words, the Wisdom of God, Sophia, took root in God's people.

Rooted thus in Israel, according to Ben Sira, Sophia flourished like a tree planted in good soil in the perfect climate. She gave forth perfume, spread out her

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<sup>3</sup> Cady, Susan, Marian Ronan, Hal Taussig, *Sophia: The Future of Feminist Spirituality*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986.

branches, went into bud, and, in time, produced fruit for all who desired to eat. Successfully rooted and growing in Israel, Sophia offers all who obey her, that they will not be put to shame, and to all who work with her, that they will not sin.

Ben Sira's second unique contribution to Biblical literature about Sophia is to assure us that what we know of Sophia is also true of God's law, the law given to Moses, which also pours forth instruction and counsel to all people. The wisdom of Sophia is the wisdom of God, who told the people to love God above all other gods, to obey the commandments, including the first commandment to love one another.

### III

Imagining wisdom as the biblical Sophia described by Ben Sira can give us new ways of thinking about our annual tradition of making New Year's resolutions and how we approach personal change in general.

First, it seems to me that Ben Sira teaches us that wisdom was there at the beginning, at the creation, and that wisdom is to be found as either the order in chaos or as the pattern underlying what appear to us as singularly our personal problem. Just as we cannot know the complete picture by looking at one piece of a puzzle, often we cannot know what needs to be changed by looking at only our personal challenges.

Take weight loss, one of the top ten New Year's resolutions, as an example. The "larger" context for why we overeat can be familial, social, national, or global. At a family level, we can overeat because the kitchen is the center of our home and because it is our responsibility, or our gift of care, to prepare food for others. At a social level, food is the stuff of celebration and gift-giving, making it hard to avoid in a culture that thrives on celebration. At a national level, food is produced and promoted like any other consumer product available for purchase, always under the assumption that more is better than less. At the global level, we know there are wide disparities in the availability of food and in many places people will go to bed tonight hungry and thirsty. Wisdom asks that we put our problem in a broad perspective before we decide what really needs to change in ourselves and our world.

Second, it seems to me that Ben Sira teaches that wisdom is already planted within us. The conventional way of thinking about personal change is that it is external to us, that it is out there, a distant goal, like the dive platform in the lake where one goes to swim. It's anchored somewhere out there and to get there we need to exert tremendous effort to reach our goal. Ben Sira says wisdom offers us another image: the seed. Change is planted within our souls like a seed and life itself waters and nurtures it. Our role is to recognize our seedlings and

cultivate them into the plants and trees that will nourish our souls and grace our personal landscape.

And that's not always easy. Sometimes we miss one and it fails by neglect. And sometimes one grows so fast that we cannot change quick enough to accommodate it and it cracks us wide open. This cracking-open business sounds metaphorical, but it's all too real and sometimes painful. All of a sudden, you can't be who you were before: you can't do your old job, you can't be with your old friends, you can't live where you live, you can't participate in your old ways. The list goes on and on. Although a good cracking-open is sometimes necessary, abrupt change can be confusing and painful for everyone. The trick, we learn from wisdom, is to remember that change is planted within us and that we must be as attentive to who we are becoming as we are to who we wish to be.

Third, it seems to me that Ben Sira teaches that wisdom is also found in God's law and that the most successful students of change will align their desired outcomes with their understanding of God's law. Believe it or not, science, modern psychology, and motivational experts support this ancient wisdom as well.

Neuroscientists have recently discovered the prefrontal cortex of the brain, the part responsible for willpower and effort, can perform only so many tasks before its performance begins to degrade. Did you know that people asked to remember a seven digit number are twice as likely to choose cake over carrots as people who are asked to remember a two digit number?<sup>4</sup> The more you ask your prefrontal cortex to change at one time, the less likely you are to succeed.

On the other hand, psychologists and motivational experts say change is more likely to be successful if it is strongly linked to one's personal values. For example, three of five keys to maintaining change identified by one motivational expert<sup>5</sup> include: 1) having a positive reason, 2) keeping a steady focus on one's passions and strengths, and 3) maintaining faith in purpose. Everyone has probably heard the conventional idea that you are more likely to lose weight if your purpose is to be healthy rather than to be thin, and the same idea applies to our spiritual values. Like a key in a lock, the door to success is more likely to open if our desired change aligns with the values we hold highest, be they the Hebrew scripture's command to love God and love others or the New Testament values of Christ: compassion, inclusion, and service.

Last week, the *Fresno Bee* newspaper asked local faith leaders what they would suggest as New Year's resolutions<sup>6</sup>. Here's twelve suggestions from people in

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<sup>4</sup> <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703478704574612052322122442.html>

<sup>5</sup> © Copyright by Steve Brunkhorst. <http://ezinearticles.com/?5-Keys-to-Maintaining-Personal-Change&id=13218>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.fresnobee.com/lifestyle/faith-and-values/story/1760670.html>

the business of discerning what Ben Sira would have called God's law: 1) memorize a spiritual song and sing it daily, 2) slow down to quiet your mind, 3) cut down on waste, 4) forgive others freely and quickly, 5) love others, 6) repay a kindness, 7) touch a life, 8) feed the hungry, 9) remember the ill, 10) be humble, 11) look past the ups and downs of the daily grind, and 12) have faith like a child. A very wise list, indeed.

#### IV

The image in today's scripture of Sophia covering the globe as a fine mist and then soaring to the highest point of heaven and back to the deepest part of the abyss before planting herself firmly in Israel made me wonder: Surely Sophia is the biblical forerunner of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament? Who else, but the Spirit, would be God's messenger here on earth? Who else, but the Spirit, would call men and women to walk dusty roads, cross turbulent seas, venture into unknown and unsafe places to tell strangers what they had seen and heard? Who else, but the Spirit, would open eyes and ears and souls to the truth and needs of the world?

The early Christians tell us otherwise. In Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is Jesus who speaks with the words of Sophia found later in Sirach, bidding all to shoulder his yoke so they might learn from him. In the beautiful hymn that begins the Gospel of John, it is Jesus, the Word, who is, as Ben Sira describes Sophia, with God in the beginning and it is Jesus, like Sophia, who was the order in chaos, through which all things came into being. And it is Jesus, like Sophia, according to John, who was made flesh and pitched his tent among us. The Apostle Paul, no stranger to the feats of strength performed by the Holy Spirit, spells it out most clearly in 1 Corinthians, "By God's action, Jesus Christ has become our Sophia."<sup>7</sup>

The identification of Jesus with Sophia, like Sirach's identification of Sophia with God's law, brings us one more insight into the wisdom of change. When Jesus entered our realm in human form, he made absolute and tangible characteristics that were elusive and intangible in Sophia. For me, the greatest of these is courage. Christ taught and demonstrated that change, be it the garden-variety kind or the momentous, once-in-a-lifetime, unimaginable sacrifice, requires a personal courage that we may or may not, as humans, have inherently or naturally. Change, of all kinds, requires the courage found in God, by God's grace.

Whether we resolve or not to change ourselves or our world in 2010, Ben Sira has taught us that there is wisdom in change. This wisdom teaches us to see what we perceive as our problem is just a piece in a larger puzzle, the broader picture that may require our attention. This wisdom also asks us to imagine

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<sup>7</sup> Cady, Susan, Marian Ronan, Hal Taussig, *Sophia: The Future of Feminist Spirituality*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986

change not as an external force of our making but as a seed that is already planted within us, one that we must carefully cultivate for the benefit of ourselves and those around us. And wisdom tells us that our faith is the key to the door of success, which will open when we align our desired change with the core values we have been given by God. In all this, the Good News is that while Sophia may bring us the wisdom to change, it is Christ, born unto us again this Christmas, who changes the entire world and gives us the courage to make our lives anew. Amen.