

Proverbs - God's Wisdom for Skillful Living

Study 1: Introduction to the Book of Proverbs:

The prologue makes it clear that the purpose of the book of Proverbs is to help us become wise.

Proverbs 1:1-7

*1 The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:
2 for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight;
3 for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair;
4 for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young—
5 let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance—
6 for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.
7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.*

What is Wisdom?

The book of Proverbs has a number of words that are all closely connected (wisdom, knowledge, understanding, prudence, insight, discipline) In the latter part of verse 3 we see that wisdom is for “*doing what is right and just and fair*” This shows us that wisdom is primarily defined morally. Wisdom is more about living right, than having intellectual knowledge. In the same way, the fool is not one who is mentally deficient, but rather one with poor morals, or one who is immature. If we take our cue from the wide variety of advice that fills the book, it is clear that wisdom has to do with living well.

“Wisdom is the skill of living. It is practical knowledge that helps one know how to act and how to speak in different situations. Wisdom entails the ability to avoid problems, and the skill to handle them when they present themselves”
(Longman p. 14)

Do you believe that God is interested in life as it is lived on this earth? Perhaps some would suggest that God is most interested in eternal life, life as it will be in the age to come. Certainly God is very much concerned with salvation and the life to come, but the book of Proverbs is an excellent reminder that God is every bit as much interested in the life we live here and now. He wants us to live “*right and just and fair*”.

No Guarantees

Proverbs are not perfect. The book of Proverbs is designed to help us live successfully, but this does not mean that we can expect life to be problem free. The book of proverbs never promises that if you live life by the book, that it will be all smooth sailing. This

book was given to us for the problems of life. While it may help us avoid problems, it also teaches us how to handle life's difficulties.

Proverbs are not promises. We cannot read them and expect them to be automatic. For instance Proverbs 21:17 *"He who loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich."* This is not a guarantee that we will never find a person who is hedonistic and rich. Proverbs are more observations that are often true in the long run. The fun loving millionaire athlete may be rich now, but 10 years after retirement what happens. Life is complex. Things don't always happen immediately.

Proverbs are not laws. Applying a proverb is not just about memorizing it and then doing it always. Sometimes we need to understand the proper context for a proverb. Take a look at Proverbs 26:4-5 *"4 Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. 5 Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes."* These proverbs seem contradictory, which would be a problem if they were meant to be universal laws. Wise people understand that there is a time for both of these proverbs, it depends on what type of fool you are talking with.

Proverbs are not always prescriptive. They do not always tell us what to do or what to value. Sometimes they describe reality without giving explicit instruction on what is good and bad. For instance Proverbs 19:4 *"Wealth brings many friends, but a poor man's friend deserts him."* This proverb accurately describes reality but does not teach us that we should abandon our poor friends. Rather it warns us of a danger of poverty.

The Structure of the Book

For the most part, the collection of proverbs has no thematic organization. Perhaps the main structural distinction is the division between chapters 1-9 and chapters 10-31. The first large section contains longer passages, whereas the second section is more or less a collection of short sayings.

The first nine chapters set the stage for the remainder of the book. The early chapters present to us the two paths of wisdom and folly. They set forth the benefits and the dangers and challenge us to choose. The remaining chapters then set forth the details of wisdom, for those who are willing to pursue it.

It may be helpful to see how an individual proverb is structured. Most of the individual proverbs are formed with a variety of parallelisms. Most proverbs are made up with two parts, with the second part relating to the first.

Sometimes the second part intensifies or elaborates the first part. For example:

Proverbs 15:10 *Stern discipline awaits him who leaves the path;
he who hates correction will die.*

Sometimes the second part contrasts the first part. For example:

Proverbs 15:22 *Plans fail for lack of counsel,
but with many advisers they succeed.*

Sometimes the proverb uses a Better-than format. For example:

Proverbs 15:16 *Better a little with the fear of the LORD
than great wealth with turmoil.*

Sometimes there is a direct comparison to physical examples. For example

Proverbs 25:28 *Like a city whose walls are broken down
is a man who lacks self-control.*

When reading a specific proverb it is often helpful to ask yourself how the second part relates to the first. This will help you analyze the core idea of the problem.

Wisdom and God

In the last line of the prologue, we see the intimate connection between wisdom and God. Although proverbs is a practical book and does not always specifically mention God in all its advice, it is quite clear that the overall book of Proverbs is governed by attention to God. As Proverbs 1:7 says, the very beginning of knowledge is found in fearing the Lord. To fear God is to take him seriously and to live humbly before him. There are other verses which connect God and wisdom.

Proverbs 3:5-6 *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own
understanding; 6 in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will
make your paths straight.*

We are not to trust our own understanding, but submit to God's guidance.

Proverbs 9:10 *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*

True understanding is first and foremost knowing God.

In fact, Proverbs 14:2 makes the point that the way we live our lives reflects on our relationship with God. *“He whose walk is upright fears the LORD, but he whose ways are devious despises him.”* Living well is God honoring. So the first message of Proverbs is that wisdom in life means knowing and fearing God. In order to live skillfully, we must first come under God's direction and guidance. This is the assumption behind all the proverbs. These are not just men's ideas, this is wisdom from God.

Questions for Further Study

1. What is the difference between intellectual ability and wisdom?
2. What is prudence? Why is it important? What does it teach us about wise living.
3. Can a person who ignores God live wisely?
4. Consider Proverbs 15:33, given your understanding of parallelism in proverbs what does this verse teach about wisdom and the fear of God?
5. Given what we know about the nature of Proverbs how can we interpret Proverbs 17:8. Does this proverb teach that we should use bribes? Why or Why not?
6. What do you hope to get out of studying the book of Proverbs?
7. Are you facing a decision or situation that requires wisdom? Would you share that with the group?

Study 2: Gaining Wisdom

How does One Gain Wisdom?

Wisdom comes from God's revelation but requires our earnest pursuit.

Proverbs 2:1-6 *My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, 2 turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, 3 and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, 4 and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, 5 then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. 6 For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.*

Proverbs 8:17 *I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me.*

See Also Proverbs 3:5-6, 4:5-8

Seeking Wisdom and Seeking God

There is a close connection between the pursuit of wisdom and the pursuit of God. Both Wisdom and God are closely connected. We see this in the above passage 2:1-6 where applying our heart to understanding results in finding the knowledge of God. True wisdom is God's wisdom and therefore the two cannot be separated. Consider also chapter 8 which explores God's relationship with wisdom.

Proverbs 8:22-31 *"The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; 23 I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began. ... 30 Then I was the craftsman at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, 31 rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind.*

See also Proverbs 1:7, 2:6-8, 9:10

Invitations and Choices

One of the most distinctive aspects of the first section of the book of Proverbs (Ch.1-9) is the persistent invitation to embrace and pursue wisdom. In many respects, this is the most important decision one must make in life. Will you pursue God and his wisdom, or will you follow your own path to folly? These invitations are presented to us in several ways.

The Call of Parent to Child (Usually Father to Son)

Proverbs 1:8 *Listen, my son, to your father's instruction
and do not forsake your mother's teaching.*

See also Proverbs 2:1, 4:1-5,

The Presentation of Benefits and Troubles

Proverbs 1:32-33 *For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the
complacency of fools will destroy them; 33 but whoever listens to
me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm."*

Proverbs 3:13-18 *Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains
understanding, 14 for she is more profitable than silver and yields
better returns than gold. 15 She is more precious than rubies;
nothing you desire can compare with her...*

See also Proverbs 2:9-12, 8:10-11, 9:11-12

The Call of Woman to Man (Both wisdom and folly are portrayed as women)

Proverbs 9:1-6 *Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn out its seven pillars.
2 She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine; she has also set
her table. 3 She has sent out her maids, and she calls from the
highest point of the city. 4 "Let all who are simple come in here!"
she says to those who lack judgment. 5 "Come, eat my food and
drink the wine I have mixed. 6 Leave your simple ways and you
will live; walk in the way of understanding.*

Proverbs 9:13-18 *The woman Folly is loud; she is undisciplined and without
knowledge. 14 She sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the
highest point of the city, 15 calling out to those who pass by, who
go straight on their way. 16 "Let all who are simple come in
here!" she says to those who lack judgment. 17 "Stolen water is
sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!" 18 But little do they know
that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of the
grave.*

See also 1:20-33, 8:1-6

The Presentation of Two Paths

Proverbs 2:12-15 *Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men, from men whose words are perverse, 13 who leave the straight paths to walk in dark ways, 14 who delight in doing wrong and rejoice in the perverseness of evil, 15 whose paths are crooked and who are devious in their ways.*

Proverbs 4:11-12 *I guide you in the way of wisdom and lead you along straight paths. 12 When you walk, your steps will not be hampered; when you run, you will not stumble.*

See also Proverbs 1:10-19, 3:5-6, 3:21-26, 4:13-15, 4:25-27, 9:6

Each of these images present us with a choice. What woman will we embrace? What path will we follow? To whom will we listen? Where is true value? Before we can learn from the rest of the book, we need to make sure we are in the right relationship and on the right track.

Questions for Further Study

1. Is it contradictory to say that wisdom is God's gift, but we need to search for it?
2. How is gaining wisdom similar to finding salvation?
3. Some have seen that the description of wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31 is an excellent description of Jesus. Do you agree? How do the two relate? How do they differ? (Refer to John 1:1-3 and Colossians 1:15-17)
4. Why do you think wisdom and folly are personified as women and not men?
5. Do you think that a person would ever say they were pursuing folly? How can we know if we are pursuing wisdom? (See Proverbs 12:15 and 14:12)
6. What does the pursuit of wisdom look like from a practical perspective? What sort of things can one do to pursue wisdom?
7. Thinking of wisdom and folly as pathways in life, what are some of the choices you have made which have affected your life, for good or for bad?
8. How would you describe your life using the path metaphor?

Study 3: Wisdom in Sexuality

The book of Proverbs has much to say about sexuality. It is filled with warnings about the dangers of adultery, but there is also much said about the importance of enjoying one's spouse. Keep in mind that the book of Proverbs is mostly written from the perspective of a father speaking to his son. Therefore, most of the advice comes from a male perspective.

Warnings

Proverbs 2:16-19 *It [wisdom] will save you also from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words, 17 who has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God. 18 For her house leads down to death and her paths to the spirits of the dead. 19 None who go to her return or attain the paths of life.*

Proverbs 6:23-29 *For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life, 24 keeping you from the immoral woman, from the smooth tongue of the wayward wife. 25 Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes, 26 for the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread, and the adulteress preys upon your very life. 27 Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? 28 Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched? 29 So is he who sleeps with another man's wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished.*

See also Proverbs 5:1-23, 7:1-27, 22:14, 23:26-28, 30:20

Jealousy

Proverbs 6:32-35 *But a man who commits adultery lacks judgment; whoever does so destroys himself. 33 Blows and disgrace are his lot, and his shame will never be wiped away; 34 for jealousy arouses a husband's fury, and he will show no mercy when he takes revenge. 35 He will not accept any compensation; he will refuse the bribe, however great it is.*

Proverbs 27:4 *Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy?*

Enjoy Your Spouse

Proverbs 5:15-20 *Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. 16 Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? 17 Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. 18 May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. 19 A loving doe, a graceful deer— may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love. 20 Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress? Why embrace the bosom of another man's wife?*

Questions for Further Study:

1. Browse through the first 9 chapters of Proverbs taking notice of the amount of material on adultery. Why do you think that warnings against adultery play such a prominent role in this introductory section?
2. What are the similarities between sexuality and the pursuit of wisdom or folly?
3. Review Proverbs 2:16-19. How does this passage reveal the spiritual character of marital unfaithfulness?
4. Is jealousy a positive or negative emotion?
5. What helpful instructions does Proverbs give to help one avoid the trap of adultery?
6. What is your reaction to the sexual language of Proverbs 5:15-20? (Shocking? Embarrassing? Surprising? Freeing? Encouraging?)
7. Pray for each other as married couples and singles. Pray for faithfulness, for captivating love between spouses, for a fuller awareness of the spiritual death that is associated with adultery.

Study 4: Wisdom in Marriage

Proverbs has a very positive view of marriage. Remembering that the book takes the perspective of a father speaking to a son, it is not surprising that in the book we see marriage from the husbands perspective. As such we see material on the blessings of a good wife and also the grief caused by a bad wife.

The Blessing of a Good Wife:

- Proverbs 5:18-19 *May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. 19 A loving doe, a graceful deer— may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love.*
- Proverbs 12:4 *A wife of noble character is her husband's crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones.*
- Proverbs 18:22 *He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the LORD.*
- Proverbs 19:14 *Houses and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the LORD.*
- Proverbs 31:10-31 *A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. ...30 Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised....*

The Quarrelsome Wife:

Other than the material focused on the adulterous wife which we considered in a previous study, Proverbs singles out the quarrelsome wife.

- Proverbs 19:13 *A foolish son is his father's ruin, and a quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping.*
- Proverbs 21:9 *Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.*

The Unloving Husband:

Other than the unfaithful husband which we considered in a previous study, proverbs makes mention of the unloving husband.

- Proverbs 30:21-23 *“Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up: 22 a servant who becomes king, a fool who is full of food, 23 an unloved woman who is married, and a maidservant who displaces her mistress.*

Questions for further Study:

1. Read all of Proverbs 31. What traits are praised in the wife of noble character?
2. Do you think that Proverbs 18:22 is an encouragement or a discouragement to single people?
3. Why do you think the trait of quarrelsomeness is singled out with respect to wives?
4. Why do you think lack of love is singled out with respect to husbands.
5. How does the material in Proverbs relate to the teaching on marriage in Ephesians 5:21-6:33.
6. Spend some time praising your spouse in public. Within the group share some of the characteristics you appreciate about your spouse.
7. Pray for each other's marriages or future spouses for those who are single.

Study 5 Wisdom in Finances:

The Book of proverbs has much to say about money. This is not surprising, because money is a significant reality in our lives. It is important for us to receive God's guidance in this area.

Our Attitude Towards Wealth

It is important first of all to understand that it is possible to be too much consumed with wealth. We must have our priorities straight.

Proverbs 3:9 *Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops;*

Proverbs 23:4-5 *Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. 5 Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle.*

Proverbs 28:20-22 *A faithful man will be richly blessed, but one eager to get rich will not go unpunished. 21 To show partiality is not good—yet a man will do wrong for a piece of bread. 22 A stingy man is eager to get rich and is unaware that poverty awaits him.*

Proverbs 30:7-9 *“Two things I ask of you, O LORD; do not refuse me before I die: 8 Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. 9 Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.*

Gaining Wealth

God is concerned with not only how we gain wealth, but he also teaches us spiritual principles which affect the loss and gain of wealth.

Proverbs 1:19 *Such is the end of all who go after ill-gotten gain; it takes away the lives of those who get it.*

Proverbs 8:18-21 *With me are riches and honor, enduring wealth and prosperity. 19 My fruit is better than fine gold; what I yield surpasses choice silver. 20 I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, 21 bestowing wealth on those who love me and making their treasuries full.*

Proverbs 10:22	<i>The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it.</i>
Proverbs 13:11	<i>Dishonest money dwindles away, but he who gathers money little by little makes it grow.</i>
Proverbs 15:6	<i>The house of the righteous contains great treasure, but the income of the wicked brings them trouble.</i>
Proverbs 19:17	<i>He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done.</i>
Proverbs 21:6	<i>A fortune made by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a deadly snare.</i>
Proverbs 22:9	<i>A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor.</i>
Proverbs 22:16	<i>He who oppresses the poor to increase his wealth and he who gives gifts to the rich—both come to poverty.</i>
Proverbs 28:8	<i>He who increases his wealth by exorbitant interest amasses it for another, who will be kind to the poor.</i>

The Relative Value of Wealth

The Book of Proverbs teaches that wealth certainly is beneficial, but that in comparison to some other things, it is of limited value.

Proverbs 10:15	<i>The wealth of the rich is their fortified city, but poverty is the ruin of the poor.</i>
Proverbs 11:4	<i>Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.</i>
Proverbs 11:16	<i>A kindhearted woman gains respect, but ruthless men gain only wealth.</i>
Proverbs 11:28	<i>Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.</i>
Proverbs 13:8	<i>A man's riches may ransom his life, but a poor man hears no threat.</i>
Proverbs 14:20	<i>The poor are shunned even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends.</i>

Proverbs 15:16	<i>Better a little with the fear of the LORD than great wealth with turmoil.</i>
Proverbs 17:16	<i>Of what use is money in the hand of a fool, since he has no desire to get wisdom?</i>
Proverbs 18:11	<i>The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it an unscalable wall.</i>
Proverbs 19:4	<i>Wealth brings many friends, but a poor man's friend deserts him.</i>
Proverbs 28:6	<i>Better a poor man whose walk is blameless than a rich man whose ways are perverse.</i>

Questions for Further Study:

1. Would you say that Proverbs has a mostly positive or mostly negative perspective about wealth and prosperity? What about its perspective on poverty?
2. What things are more valuable than wealth? Why?
3. What do you think is meant by Proverbs 10:22; "The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it." (Compare this verse to Proverbs 15:6)
4. How is our own prosperity related to the way we treat others?
5. Does wisdom lead to wealth?
6. Which Proverb on wealth and finances do you find most relevant to your life right now? Why?
7. What evidence do you see in your own life to say that your attitude and value of money and wealth is wise or foolish?