

Living with God’s Wisdom in God’s World:
An Overview of *Proverbs*
by Pastor Michael R. Jones

Introduction:

The Book of Proverbs is the second of the books of “wisdom literature.” It encapsulates the truths faithful followers of God have learned from their experiences of living in covenant with God and it speaks both to faith and life.

Wisdom is in knowing how to respond properly to a situation; knowing a pithy saying will not be sufficient when faced with a difficult situation (Prov. 26:7, 9), the truths must develop character. To apply the wisdom of the Proverbs properly, one must know them and how they are intended to be used. The Proverbs address various areas of life and faith and have as their purpose to guide the reader in how to live justly and righteously before God.

What is a proverb? A proverb is a general principle proven true in a given circumstance. The truth is usually stated in a succinct and persuasive manner.¹

What a proverb is not. (1) A Proverb is not a promise (e.g. Prov. 22:6). (2) A Proverb is not a command (e.g. Prov 22:24-25). The Proverbs are not applicable to every situation and often seem to contradict each other. In fact, some are given in seemingly contradictorily pairs (e.g. Prov. 26:4-5)! Wisdom statements, however, are often contradictory because they speak to real life. In life, what applies in one situation or set of circumstances, may not apply in another. Part of wisdom is in knowing when to apply a given truth or principle. Thus, “wisdom is always open and never brought to a conclusion.”²

The Proverbs must be properly applied; they cannot be applied indiscriminately to any given situation.³ They are general principles but because they are often written in poetic form, or at least in a succinct manner, they are not meant to be skimmed over, but to be read slowly and contemplated. For example, “Look before you leap!” is easy to remember, but could be misunderstood or misapplied. So don’t be too rigid and remember that they are general observations.⁴

The Content of Proverbs

The wisdom of Proverbs is instructional wisdom, unlike Job and some Psalms, which grapple with the heavier issues of life. Proverbs handles themes found in other books of the Old Testament but may often be seen as teaching on the themes that are played out in the historical books and proclaimed by the prophets. Proverbs compares two lifestyles. One is the lifestyle of the righteous, also referred to as the wise, the prudent, and other similar terms. These people are said to live by “wisdom.” The other is the lifestyle of the one who does not fear God, also called the fool, the simple, and other similar terms. These people are said to practice “folly.”

¹ Bill T. Arnold and Bryan T. Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 314.

² Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. I (New York, Harper, 1962), 422.

³ Tremper Longman, III, *Reading the Bible with Heart and Mind* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1997), 150.

⁴ Arnold, 315-316.

Outline of the Proverbs⁵

- I. Title and Prologue (1:1-7)
- II. Praise of Wisdom and Warning against its Opponents (1:8-9:18)
 - A. Avoid those who would lead you into folly (1:8-19)
 - B. Wisdom's Plea (1:20-33)
 - C. Wisdom's Rewards (2:1-4:27)
 - 1) Wisdom is a Reward and a Protection (2:1-22)
 - 2) Wisdom is a lifelong benefit (3:1-35)
 - 3) Wisdom is a choice of lifestyle (4:1-27)
 - D. Wisdom about Marriage and the Folly of Adultery (5:1-23)
 - E. Wisdom in Business and Society (6:1-19)
 - F. Pitfalls for the unwise and the example of the seductress (6:20-7:17)
 - G. Wisdom Praised and Defended (8:1-36)
 - H. Human Choices that Rival the Choice of Wisdom (9:1-18)
- III. The Proverbs of Solomon (10:1-22:16)
- IV. The Sayings and Further Words of Wise Men (22:17-24:34)
- V. Proverbs of Solomon from Hezekiah's Collection (25:1-29:27)
- VI. The Sayings of Agur (30:1-33)
- VII. The Sayings of King Lemuel (31:1-9)
- VIII. Wisdom, The Excellent Wife (31:10-31)

Overview and Highlights

I. Title and Prologue (1:1-7)

- The purpose of Proverbs is given in 1:2-6.
- The goal of the book is instruction for the young (1:4) but those who lack wisdom or who already have wisdom can benefit (1:5).
- The wisdom in this book is based on the fear of the LORD (1:7) which yields knowledge of the LORD, which is relational: relationship with the covenant God, Yahweh.

II. Praise of Wisdom and Warning against its Opponents (1:8-9:18)

1:20-33: Wisdom is personified as a woman. She pleads for people to listen. To reject her advice is to hate knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

2:1-22: Wisdom is attainable, but you must search for it (2:4). Wisdom comes from God himself (2:6) and is the truth of his eternal ways; it is not mere human insight.

3:1-35: Wisdom leads to a lifetime of peace and victory. The biblical approach to life is found in 3:5-6.

4:1-27: These truths have been tested by generation after generation (4:3-4) and the two ways one may choose are contrasted.

⁵ Adapted from Arnold, 316, and Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: IVP, 1964), 57.

5:15-23: Sexual delight is God's gift to married life. Faithfulness to your marriage partner yields joy and satisfaction; unfaithfulness leads to disaster. (NOTE: There are several sections in this unit of Proverbs that contain warnings against the folly of adultery, see also 5:1-14; 6:20-35; and 7:1-27).

8:1-36: This chapter is the highest point in the Bible's praise of Wisdom. Wisdom is personified as a woman who desires to be found and who desires to give life to those who embrace her (8:35-36). Though she was present when God created all things (8:22-31), she stands in the marketplace offering understanding and life even to the simplest who pass by (8:1-21). Many see in this passage a veiled reference to Jesus Christ, in whom, Paul said, are hidden "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3).

III. The Proverbs of Solomon (10:1-22:16)

- This unit contains short (mostly two-line) proverbs that deal with diverse subjects.
- Most proverbs in this section are expressed in contrasting couplets (antithetical parallelism).
- There is no organizing principle evident in this section.

IV. The Sayings and Further Words of Wise Men (22:17-24:34)

- These "thirty sayings" (22:20, cf. "excellent things" in some translations) are similar in form and content to an Ancient Egyptian document, the *Instruction of Amenemope* which is dated 1200 B.C. (over 200 years before Solomon).⁶
- These proverbs were creatively borrowed, clarified, and adapted to the worship of Yahweh.⁷
- Their foundation in another culture does not diminish the nature of these teachings as divinely inspired.
- The opening paragraph (22:17-21) marks this off as a separate section and give us the purpose for this instruction.
- The reader is to apply his heart to these words so that he will (1) trust in the Lord, and (2) know the certainty of these words of truth and repeat them to others.

V. Proverbs of Solomon from Hezekiah's Collection (25:1-29:27)

- These proverbs are gathered into topical units.
- Many of the collections deal with the behavior and character of leaders and those who must interact with leaders.
- Hezekiah was a wise king who sought for truth (25:2-3) and grew weary with "boastful subjects motivated by vain pride" (25:6-8).

VI. The Sayings of Agur (30:1-33)

- The sayings in this section and the next may have existed independently prior to the compilation of this book and were simply added to this collection. The background of the authors and the sayings is unknown but some believe their proverbs to be of Arabian origin.
- Agur begins by confessing that he does not have wisdom (30:1-9) and his numerical statements (a unique feature of Agur's proverbs) serve to demonstrate his need for wisdom.

⁶ Arnold, p. 319.

⁷ Kidner, 59.

VII. The Sayings of King Lemuel (31:1-9)

- Lemuel repeats proverbs, learned from his mother, that warn about royal responsibility.
- Lemuel's proverbs especially address the dangers of drunkenness, which leads to neglecting the law and oppression of the poor and afflicted (31:5).

VIII. Wisdom, The Excellent Wife (31:10-31)

- These verses from an acrostic poem (a poem in which each successive line begins with the next letter in the alphabet) and so presents "the ABC's of wisdom."⁸
- The book of Proverbs has warned against sexual impurity all along and exalted the role of women.
- The choice of a spouse is the first test of character and one's success in life and faith will often depend on the character of one's spouse.
- This poem goes deeper in that it personifies wisdom as a woman (just as Proverbs did at the beginning, see ch. 8), this time a wife.
- The lessons of wisdom are for everyone, the personification makes it easier to apply wise sayings to concrete examples in life.⁹

Conclusion:

Proverbs is a book containing the wisdom necessary for everyday living. While many of the truths are useful to Christians and non-Christians, their purpose in the Scriptures is to guide the child of God into living a meaningful life in communion with the LORD and his people. The knowledge provided is relational and is to impact our relationship with ourselves, God, and our fellow person, whether believer or unbeliever. The wisdom presented is to develop one's character and so impact relationships by guiding one to make proper choices in life. Two ways are presented: the way of wisdom, which heeds the instructions of the LORD and so yields positive relationship with him, and the way of folly, they way of living without regard for God or his instruction and which yields only destruction.

⁸ Allen P. Ross "Proverbs" in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1991), 1129.

⁹ Ross, 1130.