

# WISDOM LITERATURE: PROVERBS

## INTRODUCTION

People want to get to the end of their lives and say that they've experienced a life well lived. We can easily say lost people want to "win" at life, but Christians are no different. We want tips and tricks, the most change with the least amount of effort, ease without sacrifice, and success without work! We look to God only for the "inward life," yet leave it to podcasts, tv hosts, magazines, & the latest and greatest fads to guide us in our finances, health, parenting, workplaces, and other areas of our life!

The danger of this lifestyle is that every part of our lives is to be informed by God's Word, and the book of Proverbs has something to say about this. If we are honest, we often don't want The Word, we want practical tips, in manageable pieces that we can understand apart from Spirit-given insight, meditation, and critical thinking. The problem with this is that moralism does not deal with the fundamental problem every human faces – sin that separates us from God. It has never been for a lack of knowledge that one is not right with God, it is that their hearts are desperately sick (Jeremiah 17:9), and they have the desire to do good, but the inability to carry it out (Romans 7:18). Though we can understand principles, we do not possess the power to enact and sustain such righteous living apart from the Spirit's commitment to keep and sustain us. Moralism and right living do not save us, only Jesus and His gospel! God doesn't provide divinely inspired wisdom that is carried out by our own strength. **Proverbs is a divinely inspired book with wisdom from a king who couldn't live up to his own ideals and anticipates a better king who did – Jesus.**

In the book of Proverbs, chapters 1-9 are the introduction and the lens through which you interpret chapters 10-31. From the beginning we see that Wisdom is not a "thing," rather, it is a person to know and acquaint yourself with. Solomon, the main author of Proverbs, is writing, imploring his son to commit to the wisdom of the book by having a personal relationship with a person called "Wisdom" (1:20-33; 3:13-18; 4:5-9; 8:1-36; 9:1-12). Yet, just like any relationships, there are rivals to his true affection that he is cautioned to steer clear of: Enticement from sinners (1:10-19), the adulteress women (2:16-22; 5:1-23; 6:20-35; 7:1-27), and ultimately Folly herself (9:13-18). We see this plea to marry wisdom and to reject the enticing lures of Foolishness. The only way this is possible is to have a personal relationship with Wisdom.

## IMAGE FOR UNDERSTANDING

Generally speaking, "proverbs" are not biblical ideas. Rather, they have been used throughout history, covering a variety of topics, integrated in cultures worldwide, and have been passed down from generation to generation. "Proverbs" are short memorable expressions, typically displaying how life *normally* works—you might find one in a fortune cookie! Proverbs can be both situational, and occasional – they are a principle, not a promise. Biblical proverbs, however, are divinely inspired. They approve what God approves and reject what God rejects.

Example: Proverbs 6:10-11 & Proverbs 13:23

Do the Proverbs always reflect our reality? Various books within the same genre help us to rightly see how they all fit together to paint one, unified image. Books such as Job and Ecclesiastes show us that proverbs are not promises, for there are many puzzling injustices and unpredictable affairs in this life. Ultimately, there will be situations in life where wisdom principles fail, and we must submit to God's mysterious sovereignty.

\*Insofar as a Biblical proverb describes a quality of God (holiness, knowledge), that proverb is true without exception, for God is not subject to change (Numbers 23:19)

## BOOK ORGANIZATION

Prologue: Fear of the Lord (1:1-7)

Proverbs: Word of the Wise (1:8-31:9)

Postscript: Virtuous Wife (31:10-31)

## JESUS IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

In 1 Corinthians 1:24 - 30, Paul calls Jesus “the Wisdom of God.”

We can conclude that Proverbs, read and interpreted through Jesus himself, is concerned with us becoming wise for daily life through a relationship with the Messiah. You cannot grow in wisdom if you are not growing in Christ Jesus! How one walks in daily life reveals whether they follow Wisdom (Jesus) or Folly (idols). Wisdom is not having knowledge, but knowing Wisdom Himself, and that by virtue of knowing this person we are made wise. The pattern and way of Wisdom are a man: Jesus of Nazareth. Chapter 9 introduces a choice we all must make: to feast with lady Wisdom or to feast with lady Folly. This is more than a decision on feasting, but rather a faith decision on who His lover will be – Jesus, or Idols.

## BIBLE STUDY SPECIFICS: HOW TO APPROACH THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

- **Observation**
  - Identify the author (Whenever explicitly stated)
  - Note any contextual information given in the heading
    - Example: Proverbs 1:1 - “The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel”
  - What is the organization of the Proverb, if anything is noticeable?
    - What literary devices are used? What is the author emphasizing, contrasting, bringing attention to, and what is being repeated? (Repetition is key for proverbs!)

Literary Devices to look for as you observe the text:

### Synonymous Parallelism

This is a feature where the second line repeats the thought of the first line but in different words. The repetition intensifies the thoughts and feelings being expressed.

*“A false witness will not go unpunished, And he who speaks lies will not escape”* (Proverbs 19:5).

### Antithetic Parallelism

In this feature the second line is the opposite of the first. In the book of Proverbs, this type of construction is the most common of the different types.

*“He who keeps the commandment keeps his soul, But he who is careless of his ways will die”* (Proverbs 19:16).

### Synthetic Parallelism

In this poetic style the second line advances the thought of the first. Each line is synonymous but each additional line adds to the thought of the first making it more specific.

*“The discretion of a man makes him slow to anger, And his glory is to overlook a transgression”* (Proverbs 19:11).

The Proverbs also make use of literary devices such as:

**Simile** - Comparison using the words *like* or *as*:

*“But the path of the just is like the shining sun,*

*That shines ever brighter unto the perfect day.*

*The way of the wicked is like darkness;*

*They do not know what makes them stumble”* (Proverbs 4:18,19).

**Metaphor** - Comparison made not using *like* or *as*:

*“A wholesome tongue is a tree of life, But perverseness in it breaks the spirit”* (Proverbs 15:4; cf. Prov. 25).

**Synecdoche** - A part of something stands for the whole:

*"The eye that mocks his father,  
And scorns obedience to his mother,  
The ravens of the valley will pick it out,  
And the young eagles will eat it"* (Proverbs 30:17).

**Personification** - Inanimate things are given characteristics of living things: The most familiar of these sections is found in chapter eight where wisdom is personified.

*"Does not wisdom cry out,  
And understanding lift up her voice?  
She takes her stand on the top of the high hill,  
Beside the way, where the paths meet.  
She cries out by the gates, at the entry of the city,  
At the entrance of the doors:  
'To you, O men, I call,  
And my voice is to the sons of men'"* (Proverbs 8:1-3).

**Mathematical Emphasis** - Numbers are used for emphasis and as an aid to memorization:

*"These six things the LORD hates, Yes, seven are an abomination to Him..."* (Proverbs 6:16).

- The reader must carefully observe and assess what type of response is demanded from this proverb: Is there a warning to see, a principle to observe, a comparison to ponder, etc.

- **Interpretation**

- Explore the messianic significance of Proverbs (how do you see Jesus in Proverbs?)
  - Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:24- Christ as the wisdom of God
- Proverbs are meant to be short, memorable phrases that share principles that are generally true, but they themselves are not promises.

How to interpret Proverbs:

- Literary context: How do you read your passage considering the given genre: Wisdom Literature (What is the significance of the literary devices used? What do they teach or emphasize?)
- Narrative context: Who is the author(s), who is the original audience, what was the intended message, and where/how does this book fit into the overarching narrative of scripture? How does the author want the reader to respond?
- Historical context: What was happening at this point in history?
- Cultural context: What customs, practices, actions, and attitudes were common at this time?
  - Remember, we're talking about the days of King Solomon.

- **Application**

- Reading Proverbs without Christ in mind would make it nothing more than a moralistic book - lifeless and empty. If a devotional points people to solely change their behavior rather than surrender their heart to the person of Jesus who is the wisdom of God in flesh, then we missed the point!
- Is there a command to obey?
- Is there a sin to repent from?
- Is there a promise to cling to?
- Is there an example to follow? Or one to avoid?

- **Prayer**

- Pray for wisdom that is rooted in the fear of the Lord.
- Pray that God would help you obey and refrain from the ways of the wicked.
- Pray to befriend lady wisdom and to be made aware of the women folly. (Proverbs 9)
- Pray that those who read your devo would see Jesus in the Proverbs.

