
The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.**(Proverbs 1:1)**

Introduction

Mark Dever says at the end of a sermon Proverbs, “A godly ambition is to live this life to the full in preparation for the next.” His point is that to live like this requires wisdom—godly wisdom. If our ambition is to live such a life, we must commit ourselves to prioritise the search for wisdom.

At the ripe age of 120, Moses, who was known as the meekest man in Israel’s old covenant era (Numbers 12:3), prayed, “So teach us to number our days, that we might get a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12). After a long life, and just before the ending of that long life, Moses knew the priority in life: wise living. His prayer revealed its priority.

What is the priority of your life? Where on the list of your resolutions is wisdom found? Is it there at all? Perhaps, at the beginning of a new year, you have resolved for a healthy body and therefore a healthy diet and scheduled exercise. Perhaps you have resolved for a healthy mind and therefore scheduled study and reading. Perhaps you have resolved to prosper in your vocation and therefore have dedicated to pursue more learning. Perhaps your resolution involves improved relationships and therefore you have intentionally planned to spend time and to work on better communication and demonstration of love. In all of this, have you resolved also for improved wisdom?

In point of fact, wisdom is not an *additional* resolution; it is required if the other resolutions will be pursued in an appropriate way. Wisdom is not opposed to these, but is required for them. These resolutions, pursued in a God-honouring way, are reflections of the wise person.

It is for this reason that we need to be introduced to wisdom. And I can’t think of a better place to do this than the book of Proverbs.

Life is tough. Christians face hardship. Christians face difficult situations and challenging choices. And Proverbs faces this reality head on. The book of Proverbs is not idyllic. It recognises that we live in a broken world. None of the proverbs would even be necessary in a perfect world. But since we *don’t* live in a perfect world, we need these proverbs. We need God’s wisdom if we will face the challenges of this world with godly skill. Proverbs aims to do this. Proverbs provides us with the education that every child of God needs.

In this study, we will simply be introduced to this book before embarking on a more detailed exposition of it. We will do this under several headings.

A Book about Wisdom

Proverbs is in the genre of Wisdom Literature in Scripture—a genre which includes many of the Psalms, the book of Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Why is it called this?

Sproul has observed, “Traditionally, these five books have also been known as Wisdom Literature because of their emphasis on understanding and attaining wisdom for all areas of life, including our relationships with God and with one another.” In other words, the purpose of this literature is that God’s people might live well—that those in covenant relationship with the Lord would live in accordance with God’s order of the way things are to be.

Two Wise Questions

It has been noted that in Job, as well as in Ecclesiastes, the pursuit of wisdom centres on *why* questions. For instance, Job is a great book to read and study when you are beleaguered by the world and when your flesh and soul cry out, “Why is this happening?” It is the great piece of biblical literature to turn to when, in exasperation, you say, “I don’t need this!” Apparently you do!

The book of Job equips us to exercise the wisdom of submission to the sovereign Lord over all:

Then Job arose, tore his robe, and shaved his head; and he fell to the ground and worshiped. And he said: “Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked shall I return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; Blessed be the name of the Lord.” In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong.

(Job 1:20–22; cf. 40:3–5)

Ecclesiastes also, in a different vein, asks why as we face what seems to be the futility of life. It helps us to glean the wisdom to live life to the full because we are going to die. It instructs us to live wisely—that is, to live fully and faithfully rather than foolishly and futilely.

Neither Job nor Ecclesiastes answers all our questions. Our *whys* are often left hanging. Yet, properly embraced, these books answer the *what* question. That is, these books tell us *what* a wise response to the experience of life looks like. In Job’s case, Job 1:20–22 was the answer. Similarly, the answer of what we are to do if we will live wisely is found at the end of Ecclesiastes, “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

Proverbs, however, is a wisdom book in which we see more of the *practical* nature of wisdom. It does not address so much the *why* or the *what* questions, but rather seeks to answer the *how* questions.

Keeping before us the what-to-do of Ecclesiastes 12:13, Proverbs provides us with the practical wisdom needed to carry out these commandments. It is as if Proverbs is providing concrete exhortations and examples of how to live in such a way that, like Job, we will bless the name of the Lord.

Dever observes that the book of Proverbs “is a book of wisdom. It is, in fact, the most extensive straight ethical section in the Bible. It presents much of what the Bible teaches about how we should live our everyday lives.”

Proverbs provides concrete examples and exhortations of what a wise existence looks like. In short, biblical wisdom tells us the *why* of our existence and the *how* of our existence. Job and many of the psalms, along with Ecclesiastes, address the former; Proverbs the latter.

So, if you want to know what wise living looks like, then look into the God-breathed book of Proverbs. This book provides a richly essential education concerning how to live. But before you and I enrol in its class, we need to qualify for this. That qualification is a covenantal one (vv. 1, 7).

A Book about Worship

The assumption of the book is that those who delve into its pages do so because they are in covenant relationship with God. Verse 1 implies this: “The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.”

The Jewish monarchy was a strong form of theocracy. God has rules for his people. He has statutes for them. He has expectations for them. Proverbs contains such.

Importantly, Proverbs had a royal audience in mind. It was for the preparation of princes. But, unlike the pomp and circumstance of today’s royalty, this preparation was so that rulers would rule in the fear of God, for the glory of God.

Christians are the King’s kids. This is for us. Proverbs aids us to live ethically to the glory of God. Therefore, it is a wealth of information for biblical counsellors.

A Book about Worldview

Related to the above, Proverbs is also a book about worldview. Who or what we worship always affects how we interpret life and how we live that life. Proverbs contrasts two ways

of life: the way of life and the way of death. “Life” is found some forty times in this book, while “death” is found eighteen. Consider the following verses:

Proverbs 14:12 – There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.

Proverbs 12:28 – In the path of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death.

Proverbs 8:32–36 – And now, O sons, listen to me: blessed are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from the LORD, but he who fails to find me injures himself; all who hate me love death.

So, then, what is wisdom?

There are different words used in Proverbs to describe wisdom, and they have different nuances. For example, the word used in v. 2 denotes skill. It is used 149 times in the Old Testament. It is first used to describe the skilled wisdom of tabernacle workers (Exodus 28:3; 31:3; etc.). It can be used to describe living life constructively, and even creatively, according to God’s instructions. It implies the ability to make sense out of chaos. (Note the collection of goods from which the gifted artisans would “make sense,” in accordance with God’s design, in Exodus 28 and 31). It describes the ability to make order out of chaos. In fact, this ability to make sense of chaos is what is behind Moses’ plea in Psalm 90:12 to receive wisdom.

We could expand this. Wise living is such that our lives invite the presence of God. That was the very express purpose of the wisdom exercised by the tabernacle builders.

The word translated “wise” in v. 3 is a different word. It means to be circumspect or alert. It speaks of (God-defined) intelligence. Those who are wise see all of life as God does (cf. Genesis 3:6). To do so makes one prosperous (see Deuteronomy 29:29).

To live in accordance with biblical wisdom is to live to the glory of God. It is to think and to behave giving weight to God’s person and therefore to his prescriptions. It is to live orderly, to live as ordered by God. This will result in orderly living! Perhaps more succinctly, living wisely is making life work to the glory of God.

A Book about Well-being

Proverbs helps the Christian to live a life of wellness in an unwell world. It does so by telling us how to be wise in various areas of life.

What areas of wisdom does it address? It addresses wisdom and friendships, wisdom and family relationships (parent/child, siblings, marriage, household servants), wisdom and

the workplace, wisdom and wealth, wisdom and finances, wisdom and poverty, wisdom in conflict, wisdom and the use of words, wisdom and self-control, wisdom and the (in)justice system and wisdom and the sensual allure of the world. (This last is quite a dominant theme.) And these are merely a sampling!

This book is rich with God's wisdom. You and I should not merely be introduced to this wisdom, but must also be imbibed with it.

Consider how this will not only help you to order your life, but how your understanding and applying of this wisdom will equip you to counsel one another to do the same.

A Book that Requires Wise Handling

Proverbs requires wise handling. We do well to ask, how do we approach these wise proverbs? Let me suggest a few things.

Religiously

First, we must handle this book religiously. As I have said, this is not mere moralistic advice. It is rooted in a covenantal relationship with God and is therefore rooted in a covenantal community. God's people are to learn it and to live it. Accountability is implicit.

Carefully

The proverbs are principles and probabilities, not absolute promises. For example, it is a general principle that "a soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (15:1). We all had experiences contrary to this principle, but it is a generally wise principle. The same can be said, for example, about 16:7: "When a man's ways please the LORD, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him."

In these examples, the proverb may not *always* be immediately true, but it will be ultimately true (Dever). Though, no doubt, we can see these as precepts, yet at the same time we must be careful when it comes to how we apply them.

For example, various proverbs address the matter of corporal punishment. But they do not teach the *exclusive* use of the rod in discipline. Prudence is a huge part of wisdom!

Orderly

There is an outline to Proverbs. Very broadly, we can see the following outline:

1. The Introduction to Wisdom (1:1-7)
2. The Invitation to Wisdom (1:8-9:18)

3. The Implications of Wisdom (10:1–31:31)

The second section serves as an invitation to the third. It where the appetite for wisdom. Someone has called chapters 1–9 the *grammar* of heavenly wisdom and chapters 10–31 the *vocabulary* of heavenly wisdom.

Poetically

There are themes in these chapters, but be careful of treating the book like a narrative. Expect metaphors and imagery.

Expectantly

There is a load of wisdom in these pages. If we will live wisely, we need to pay attention.

Christocentrically

Proverbs, like all of Scripture, leads us to Christ. This is perhaps particularly true of the opening verses. Christ is the sum of all wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30–31).

Proverbs will convict and even condemn us. We will find ourselves facing our failures. It is then that we need to look to Christ for redemption and atonement. “By steadfast love and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of the LORD one turns away from evil” (16:6).

As we read Proverbs we become aware that, apart from the grace of God in Christ, we are on the path to death. We need to be on the path to life.

We can live wisely. We can live in such a way that our life makes sense to the glory of God. We can live in such a way that our lives are faithful and fruitful. We can live lives that are orderly, according to God’s order. Though we cannot always know *why* what is happening is happening, we can, however, know how to respond in the midst to what is happening. The book of Proverbs supplies the how. Let’s learn how, and then do it—for our good and to God’s glory.

AMEN