

# Proverbs

Solomon was famous for his wisdom, and produced 3,000 proverbs (1Kings 4:32). The book of Proverbs lists Solomon as a source in 1:1, 10:1 and 25:1, the last being additional proverbs of Solomon copied into the collection in the days of Hezekiah, about 200 years after Solomon's era. A couple of other names, Agur and Lemuel, are listed as sources for small segments of the book (30:1, 31:1), as well as "the wise" (22:17, 24:23), and finally an acrostic poem about the excellent wife/woman (31:10-31) for a total of 7 sections.

The book is composed as instructions from a father to his son (1:8, 2:1, 3:1, 3:11, etc.). The pursuit of wisdom, and its attendant upright behavior, is encouraged in the strongest terms, while warnings against folly and its self destructive indulgences are likewise graphically stated.

"The fear of the Lord" is a primary virtue, mentioned directly at least 16 times in Proverbs. "The fear of the Lord" is the starting base for building real wisdom and knowledge (1:7, 9:10).

Note the proper role of both Dad and Mom in 1:8.

The dichotomy of wisdom versus folly , life versus death, light versus darkness, good versus evil is set up in 1:10-19 and 20-33. That binary choice is going to be presented over and over again, especially in the first 9 chapters of the book. The same conflict of choices is presented throughout the Bible, and we see echoes of Proverbs descriptions of Wisdom and Folly especially in the two cities, the two women of Revelation. It is either Babylon the harlot or Jerusalem the bride, not both. We choose who to listen to, whose invitation to accept.

Paul quoted 1:16 in Romans 3:15. James restates 1:6ff in James 1:5. The heart as a tablet in 3:3 recurs in 2 Corinthians 3:4. Romans 12:16 draws on 3:7. Luke 2:52 tells us that Jesus followed the Proverbs 3:4 path to success. Hebrews 12:5-6 quotes 3:11-12. In other words, we see snippets of the wisdom of Proverbs over and over again in the New Testament. And in 3:18-20 we see wisdom as a divine attribute before the creation of the world, with knowledge and understanding.

Most of the Proverbs (short, memorable, pithy sayings) pertain to every day affairs, every day behavior. 3:27-30 are good examples of the ethical teachings that lie ahead in chapters 9-31.

## Wisdom Personified

Note that in 1:20ff and 3:13ff and 8:1ff Wisdom is personified as an upright woman offering guidance and blessings. Attributes ascribed to her in 3:14-18 and again in chapter 8 are rightly understood as attributes of God, and especially of the Word who became flesh. Ultimately, Wisdom's invitation is fulfilled in Christ. However, he himself is not Wisdom as pictured here, rather he has the spirit of the LORD, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding (Isaiah 11:1-2). Jesus is however explicitly (if obliquely) mentioned in Proverbs as the Son of the Holy One in Proverbs 30:3-4 (compare John 3:13, Ephesians 4:9-10,

## Proverbs 4-6

Chapter 4 extols the pursuit of wisdom. Wisdom is not innate, but rather is to be sought and

nurtured and appreciated. Her (wisdom again is personified as a feminine virtue) value goes to the very preservation and purpose of life.

The increasing brightness of the life of the righteous in v18 is echoed many times in the New Testament and brings to mind 2 Peter 1:19.

The “springs of life” flowing from the heart is language Jesus used to describe the Holy Spirit given to his followers (John 7:37-39).

Chapter 5 especially emphasizes chastity and marital fidelity in contrast to adultery and unfaithfulness. The snares and damage of sexual immorality are laid out in v1-14 and again v22-23, and in between is a segment extolling the blessing of marital devotion and faithfulness. In imagery not unlike that of the Song of Songs the father extolls the joy of choosing to love the one you marry. It is a choice. A choice to be happy in relationship with your spouse, choosing to be satisfied, willing to be content. Not looking for “forbidden fruit” that never could be truly good, but cherishing the good received in the one man with one woman becoming and being one flesh. These verses beautifully depict God’s ideas of how a man should cherish his wife, and a wife choose to exclusively be devoted to him.

Chapter 6:1-5 discourages cosigning a loan. Ever. Guaranteeing someone else’s debt will almost guaranteed end badly, don’t do it. Then v6-11 introduces a recurring character in Proverbs, the sluggard, the lazy man, the person who won’t work. Even the ant, a tiny creature without “intelligence,” has the sense to provide what’s necessary and “plan” ahead.

The 7 human failings in v16-19 are surely worth noting and taking to heart. Pride, deception, spreading false tales, stirring up trouble in the family (including of course the family of God), God hates the selfishness and trouble-making described here.

Because sexual immorality is so pervasive (see 1 Corinthians 7:2), and such a pitfall for the young, we have again warnings against going down that road to disaster in 6:20ff (and in chapter 7). In 6:21 the idea of binding the commandments on the heart stresses not just obedience for whatever reason, but actual devotion, commitment to what is right and good. In v25-28 the idea of sex as a commodity, another person as a consumable item, objectifying people as things to be used, is deplored as both degrading and utterly self-destructive. And, as echoed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:18, sexual sins are especially harmful to those who indulge in them.

#### Proverbs 7-9

As Proverbs 6:20-35 warned against adultery, 7:1-27 warns against the adulteress, the seducer. Again we have the urging to not only follow but to treasure and dwell upon the righteous teachings of the parent. Wisdom and Insight are personified as friends, allies to escape the seductress. She is seen peddling her deceptive allure in the dark. She proffers pleasures and an illusion of safety, and the person persuaded by her temptations is like an “ox goes to the slaughter” (7:22). This is especially true of the allure of sexual sin, but really is the process of temptation into sin in broad terms. The excitement of taking the forbidden fruit, the allure of promises of pleasure, the arrogance of the one who thinks they can “get away” with it. Again, the

seductive adulteress here is like Babylon the mother of prostitutes in Revelation.

In contrast to the promises of stolen pleasure that lead to death in chapter 7 we have the invitation of Wisdom in chapter 8. Her invitation is not on a dark corner from behind a veil, but in broad daylight along the thoroughfares and beside the gates of the town. What she offers exceeds the value of the baubles of wealth people pursue (8:10-11, 19). Once again, the things wisdom eschews are worth noting and remembering (8:13). Wisdom is not common, but is the only basis for just rule (8:15-16).

8:22-31 is a beautiful depiction of Wisdom as God's servant and master builder in creation. I'm reminded of the role of Bezalel when the Tabernacle was built. It was a joy for Bezalel to do the Lord's work, and a joy for the Lord to see his servant expertly accomplishing his purposes. Notice the emphasis in v31, this world is the focus of God's creation, humans are God's delight.

Still picturing Wisdom as a feminine entity, chapter 9 continues with her domain and her hospitality. Her house has 7 pillars, and it may be that James had that in mind when he listed 7 attributes of godly wisdom in James 3:17 (1 pure; 2 peaceable; 3 gentle; 4 open to reason; 5 full of mercy and good fruits; 6 impartial; 7 sincere).

Have you ever noticed that some people are more "teachable" than others? 9:7-9 points that out, some people react to correction by gratefully learning a lesson, others react with anger and hostility.

9:10 is a bookend in section 1 corresponding to 1:7.

9:13-18 as previously gives us the antithesis of Wisdom, Folly. Two women inviting people to come, but with very different purposes and very different results. v16 is a repeat of v4. v5 and v17 are opposites.

## Proverbs 10-12

Proverbs 10:1 denotes that what follows are the proverbs of Solomon. While the previous chapters of wise teachings did have a few proverbs in the mix (1:7, 3:27, 3:28, 3:35, for example) the format of the collection of proverbs is found in 10:1-29:27.

Several themes recur in the proverbs, including honesty, integrity, honoring parents, working and earning, guarding our words, and on the flip side, wickedness, sloth, dishonesty, cheating, greed, lying, gossip, and so on. Many of the proverbs acknowledge God's providence for the upright.

The proverbs are collected nuggets of wisdom, not necessarily presented as revealed truth in the exactly the same sense as a prophet saying, "thus says the Lord." Because the proverbs apply to different circumstances in life, some of them are going to resonate with the reader more strongly at one time than another.

In today's reading some of the proverbs that catch my eye include the winking in 10:10, coupled with the slander in 10:18 and fool's joke in 10:23. The principle of doing honest business in 11:1, the brevity of what the wicked hope for in 11:7, the foolishness of talking down others in

11:12 and 11:13, the disapproval of superficial beauty in 11:22, the blessing of being generous in 11:24. Humane treatment of animals in 12:10, the venting of the foolish in 12:16, the duration of honesty in 12:19, and the value of encouragement in 12:25.

### Proverbs 13-15

A recurring “character” in Proverbs is the wise son... Proverbs 13:1, 10:1, 15:20, 23:24; and the admonition to be a wise son in 23:15, 23:19, 27:11.

Another recurring “character” in Proverbs is the scoffer, the opposite of the wise son/man... 13:1, 1:22, 3:34, 9:7, 9:8, 9:12, 14:6, 15:12, 19:25, 19:29, 20:1, 21:11, 21:24, 22:10, 24:9.

13:20, it matters who you spend time with.

14:1 wise women are house (family) builders.

14:4, 23 the easy road isn't the best road.

14:12, 16:25 is referenced by Paul in Romans 6:21.

14:21, 31 help your neighbor, Luke 10:25-37.

14:29 be slow to anger; 15:18, 16:32, 19:11, James 1:19.

14:34 nations are accountable for righteousness or sin

15:1, 18 a soft answer versus a harsh word, another recurring theme in Proverbs and throughout Scripture, including examples we've read in Judges 8:1-3, 1 Samuel 25:10-13.

15:8, 9, 26, 29 God cares about character, and we should too.

15:16, 17 what matters most.

### Proverbs 16-18

16:1, “The plans of the heart...” In Proverbs the “heart” is mentioned 94 times. Several times the Hebrew word meaning “heart” is translated “sense” or “mind” or “opinion” (in the ESV or NIV for example) or even “wisdom” in some instances in the KJV. In chapter 16 we have the heart mentioned in v1, 5, 9, 21, 23. Then in 17 v3, 16, 18, 20, 22 and in 18 v2, 12, 15. The heart is associated with reasoning and feelings, desires and motives. As in 17:3, “the LORD tests hearts.”

16:18 and 19 put pride and humility in perspective. Pride may seem to succeed for a time, but the outcome is failure and destruction. Humility may look like weakness to some, but is the path to real victory in life. See also 18:12.

16:25 repeats 14:12. Must be an important idea.

16:28, watch out for people who have “secrets” to share. Don’t be a whisperer, and don’t be sucked in by strife-stirrers, neither on a personal level nor in the big stories of the day. Likewise in 17:9. And again in 18:8.

16:33 suggests God’s involvement in everything that happens in this world, but is not advocating tossing dice as a means of discerning God’s will. Sometimes though a coin toss might be the best option, 18:18.

17:17 is a classic concept of family ties, which for us should be even more potent in the family of faith. Christian brothers and sisters should certainly support each other in adversity. Watch out for 18:19, and always choose to be the friend in 18:24.

Some say “laughter is the best medicine.” That’s almost what 17:22 suggests.

17:28, appearing wise by saying little, is a concept repeated several times in Proverbs.

18:10, 11. Not all fortresses are of equal value.

Marriage in 18:22 is wholly consistent with Genesis 2.

Proverbs 19-21

The “false witness” in 19:5 and 19:9, 19:28, is frequently derided in Proverbs (6:19, 12:17, 14:5, 21:28, 25:18). Proverbs strongly advocates seeking the truth, not being a gossip or slanderer, and certainly not lying or repeating lies.

Wine and other alcoholic beverages are generally disparaged in Proverbs for their abuse, over use, behavior alteration, and addictive qualities as in 20:1, 21:17, 23:20-21, 23:29-31, 31:4-7.

The sluggard, 19:24, 20:4, and 21:25 is a character demeaned repeatedly in Proverbs for laziness, waste, lack of productivity and making excuses. See 6:6, 6:9, 10:26, 13:4, 15:19, 22:13, 24:30, 26:13-16.

The reality of human failure in general is another running theme in Proverbs, as in 20:6, 9.

Dishonest business practices are chided again in 20:10, 14, 23.

Honoring gray hair as in 20:29 is uncommon.

Doing what is right is much more important than religious ritual, 21:3 (Micah 6:6-8).

A harmonious household is of great value, 19:13, 21:9, 21:19 and 25:24, 27:15.

It is good to celebrate real justice, 21:15.

## Proverbs 22-24

Training and disciplining children is a repeated theme in the Proverbs. Both “train up a child” in 22:6 and the “rod of discipline” in 22:15 (also 23:13-14, 29:15, and recall 13:24) are recurring concepts, familiar and yet still difficult to implement. The “rod of discipline” isn’t only or especially corporal punishment, as the same word is used for a ruler’s scepter (Genesis 49:10) and a shepherd’s staff (Leviticus 27:32) or a commanders staff (Judges 5:14). Discipline can call for physical punishment, but is also broadly exercising guidance and keeping authority consistently for a child. Training a child with appropriate discipline is necessary and effective in preparing a child for adult life, but cannot be understood in these proverbs as sure-fire programming, as each person will inevitably make up their own minds who they will serve.

Generosity toward the poor and conversely not taking advantage of the poor and weak is also a recurring theme in Proverbs. Note 22:9, 16, 22-23, and recall 14:31, 19:17, 21:13.

Choose friends wisely, as you will tend to learn from them how to behave and what to think, 22:24-25, 23:19-21.

Ancient landmarks (22:28, 23:10) are boundary stones marking off property lines, surveyors corners, but they are also guiding principles, ethics, morals, manners, that we learn from parents and the older generation.

Good manners are also highlighted in 23:1-3 as a social expedient. Self restraint almost always gives a better impression to others than self indulgence.

Again, indulgence in recreational or habitual drinking is strongly discouraged in 23:19-21 and at length in 23:29-35.

Helping people in trouble may be hard, like a battle, but the wise are called to help the oppressed, 24:10-12. Willful ignorance of injustice is not justification for allowing it to continue.

Eat honey, it’s good, but exercise self control and moderation, 24:13 (and 25:16, 25:27). Enjoy the good things God provides, but don’t let pleasure and self indulgence set your course.

Priorities... make sure you’ll have food, then work on the comforts of the house, 24:27. It’s good to do the necessary before the important or what sometimes seems to be urgent.

The end does not justify the means, and dishonesty or lies are never the path to justice, 24:28-29.

## Proverbs 25-26

Chapter 24 closed with “sayings of the wise” (v23-34). Chapter 25 is introduced as “proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied.” This is worth noting because it’s one of those indicators in the text of how the Bible came into being over a long period of time through the hands of many prophets and scribes. The original composition of Solomon’s

proverbs didn't by any means include all that he had authored, and here we see that more than 200 years later in the days of Hezekiah (and the prophets Isaiah and Micah) another group of Solomon's proverbs were preserved by copying the old texts as an addendum on the Proverbs scroll.

When we see a proverb like 25:4 about refining silver, do we appreciate that Solomon was really talking about humans, that we need to be refined and purified to eliminate the evil and make us suitable vessels for God? When we see the teaching of 25:6-7 do we connect that with Jesus' teaching about not exalting ourselves, but taking a place of humility and accepting a place of honor if it is offered (Luke 14:7-11). Or appreciate the echoes of 25:11 in Ephesians 4:29? And 25:21-22 is quoted by Paul in Romans 12:20 while Romans 12:21 leans on Proverbs 25:26.

Proverbs 26:4-5 seem to be opposites, and yet we can appreciate that both are true, depending on circumstances. 26:11 is referenced by Peter in 2 Peter 2:22.

The sluggard, one who irresponsibly avoids work to his own harm and the harm of others, is pilloried in 26:13-17.

26:18 uses heavy handed metaphor to deplore people who mislead other people and then make light of it if their falsehood is exposed. Then v19 highlights the role tale-bearing has in keeping trouble heated up. Consider that the "whispering" which stirs up strife doesn't have to be lies, it may just be unnecessary stirring of discontent by repeating what is best forgotten or not our own business. The anti-whispering theme continues, considering various angles, through v28, including warning against those who speak graciously to your face but harbor malice that will come out in the "right" circumstances.

#### Proverbs 27-29

The wisdom sayings address matters both profound and common. We see themes (27:1) included in the teachings of the New Testament (James 4:13-16). We see what amounts to common sense and good manners (27:12, 14).

Justice is a frequent theme of the Proverbs, including 28:5 regarding the righteous wanting justice to be done, and 29:4, justice is the proper business of rulers, and 29:26 that real justice does and will come from God.

Generosity has been extolled several times in Proverbs and is again in 28:27.

Diligence in labor and stewardship are likewise extolled many times in Proverbs, as in 27:23-27, 28:19.

Watching one's tongue/words is also visited over and over again, as in 29:20.

#### Proverbs 30-31

We don't know who Agur (30:1) was, nor can we identify King Lemuel (31:1), but the words of

each are called an “oracle” (ESV, literally “the burden”), a word used several times for prophetic utterances of Isaiah (13:1, 14:28, etc.) and Ezekiel (12:10) and Nahum (1:10) and others.

Agur deplores his own limitations (30:1-3) leading into a thoughtful soliloquy that points to the Son of God, Creator of the cosmos, coming into the world and ascending again to heaven (see John 3:13, Ephesians 4:8-10; consider also Deuteronomy 30:11-14 and Romans 10:6-8).

30:5 is very similar to Psalm 18:30. 30:6 echoes Moses in Deuteronomy 4:2 and is restated by Jesus in Revelation 22:18-19. The prayer for just enough, and not too much or too little in v8-9 comes through in the “Lord’s prayer” as “give us this day our daily bread, and deliver us from evil...”

30:11-14 sound very much like Jesus’ critique of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law in his generation.

31:1 credits the words of Lemuel as being a message from his mother. Remember that the opening of Proverbs was a father speaking to his son, but also with reference to heeding his mother’s instructions.

31:3 warns the ruler against what is declared to have been Solomon’s downfall in 1 Kings 11:1-4. v4-7 argues against the seductive dissipation of drunkenness as a crutch for the foolish and the miserable, while a ruler is to be attentive to his duties toward the poor and weak.

The excellent wife/woman in 31:10-31 is a description of the woman Ruth is shown to be in her relationship with Naomi and Boaz, and building a family. The strengths of the smart hard working woman are admirably displayed. At the same time notice the call for her family, husband and children, to honor her and give her praise (31:28-31). Happy families gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the various members of the household, privately and publicly. Husbands should praise their wives in their children’s presence, and vice versa. Children should learn by example to bless mother (and father). And overall, the secret to a woman’s strength is no secret at all, it is the fear of the Lord (30:30), as was foundational all through Proverbs (recall 1:7).