

Many who approach the book of Proverbs may feel overwhelmed by the task of trying to understand and apply it. But we should not neglect its study. The wise were an important group in the OT (*cf.* Jer 18:18) and we, too, should strive to be wise. The wise give counsel and strive to apply God's revelation to every day living.

Just as the offices of prophet, priest and king find ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ, so also is He the ultimate "wise man" (*cf.* Col. 2:3; 1 Cor 1:24, 30). In and behind all that we read in Proverbs and all the wisdom literature is Jesus Christ himself. It is a worthy pursuit to correctly learn God's wisdom. Hopefully through this series believers will become interested, equipped and skilled in applying the proverbs. The book of Proverbs is essentially introduced in the first seven verses.

### I. The title (1:1)

The name of the book comes from the first word of the book. The word "proverb", which basically means comparison, includes both brief sayings as well as longer, often figurative, discourses. The human author of the book of Proverbs was primarily Solomon, although not exclusively. There are also the sayings of the wise (22:17ff; 24:23ff), the sayings of Agur (chapter 30) and the sayings of King Lemuel (chapter 31). The final compilation was apparently in the days of King Hezekiah (25:1).

### II. The purpose of the Proverbs (1:2-6)

1. *The primary purpose is to know wisdom.* The challenge is understanding what "wisdom" means.
  - a. Wisdom (vv 2, 7) is the broadest and most inclusive term. It was used to describe the skillfulness of craftsmen and even sailors in their navigation ability. Hence it is concerned with **skillful living**.
  - b. Discipline (vv 2, 3, 7) also "instruction", occurs frequently in the Proverbs and includes the idea of correction. There may be hints at the pain sometimes experienced in the process of gaining wisdom, at the help and correction given by someone more experienced, and at the important part of self-discipline.
  - c. Insight or understanding (vv 2, 5, 6) is often used interchangeably with "wisdom". The background idea of the verb form is "to discern". Hence, it includes the ability to discriminate between such things as right and wrong, helpful and harmful, important and trivial.
  - d. A prudent life or wise dealing or wise behavior (v 3) appears to point particularly to the successful application of wisdom in interpersonal relationships but with clear moral overtones.
  - e. Prudence (v 4) might better be translated "shrewdness", because it can be used negatively as well as positively. The underlying concept is the ability to plan ahead.
  - f. Knowledge (v 4), another important word (*cf.* v 7), includes knowing and earnestly desiring to do what God requires and what pleases Him. *Cf.* 9:10.
  - g. Discretion (v 4) has the idea of shrewd planning.
  - h. Learning (v 5) refers to a grasp of material well enough to teach it or persuade others.
  - i. Guidance or wise counsel (v 5) is well translated as just that, i.e., guidance.

These verses also show that wisdom is a moral issue (*cf.* v 3b). James 3:13-17 also states this explicitly. The "wisdom" of the Proverbs can be wrongly used or improperly motivated, but it is not then the wisdom of God for which we should strive. Wisdom is the skillful living which seeks to please God.

2. *The secondary purpose is to instruct on the use of proverbs as a way of teaching and learning.*

There are certain distinct advantages to the proverbs. (1) They are usually quite short and hence easily memorized. (2) They frequently use vivid analogies which also enhance remembering them.

### III. The theme of the Proverbs and foundational principle of wisdom (1:7): *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.*

1. *What is the fear of the Lord?* It includes ...
  - a. a knowledge about God: His character and His will;
  - b. a personal knowledge of God, a relationship to God, speaking of those who hope in Him (Ps 147:11);
  - c. obedience to his will (Prov 14:2; Psalm 128:1); and
  - d. a joy in obedience (Psalm 112:1).

The fear of the Lord therefore begins with an understanding that God is holy and totally separate from sin. Sin requires punishment. But God dwells with the humble and contrite of heart. So those who fear the Lord humble themselves before God. They reverently worship Him and desire to do His will.

2. *How then is the fear of the Lord the beginning of wisdom or knowledge?*

- a. "Beginning" can be used both in the sense of time and importance. It is the first thing to begin attaining wisdom and the most important thing in having true wisdom.
- b. Wisdom is primarily a moral issue and not an advanced level of knowing facts or intelligence. Wisdom has to do with the application of God's Word in our daily lives. *Cf.* 7b; Ps 14:1; 53:1.
- c. It is not simply the start of obtaining wisdom which we can then leave behind. It belongs to the essential character of heavenly wisdom. *Cf.* James 3:17.

It should be the desire of every believer to live skillfully. To do so the number one priority is the fear of the Lord. It helps to honestly ask ourselves certain questions: Why do we desire wisdom? How or where are we seeking wisdom? How are we seeking to teach wisdom?

God wants His children to live skillfully in this life and has given us His Word and His Spirit to help us to that end. The book of Proverbs is part of that. May we will all be encouraged to read the proverbs, study them and learn to apply them to our lives.

## Recommendations for understanding the Proverbs

1. Remember that the book is a collection of collections. Different sections can have different literary forms.
2. Learn to recognize the different literary forms within the Proverbs.
  - In the first collection there are longer exhortation and speeches. The latter are personifications of wisdom.
  - Parallelism is a typical form in Hebrew poetry and verse. There are essentially three types: (1) A thought is repeated, sometimes using different words, for the sake of emphasis. (2) The opposite is stated in the parallel. This might reveal differences, further possibilities or consequences. (3) The parallel might take the first statement and progress further with it.

It is important to note that translations often add conjunctions, such as “as”, “like”, “but”, and “and”, that are not in the original and may not correctly interpret the intended parallelism. Also, both parts of a parallelism should be considered together, not separately. For example, Proverbs 10:1 is not teaching that there are differing results among parents when the child is wise or foolish, as if the father was happy when the son was wise but didn’t care when the son was foolish. Rather together the two parts teach that parents rejoice when a son is wise and grieve when a son is foolish.
  - There are also different forms of proverbs. There are sayings, i.e., statements made by comparisons or numerical sequences. There are exhortations, i.e., commands or prohibitions. There are rhetorical questions, calls to listen, calls to think, reports of experiences, blessings, and allegories.
3. Pay attention to literary hints:
  - repetition, especially of individual words;
  - “parenthesis”, i.e., a word or phrase with which a large section is both begun and ended;
  - synonyms, which generally are together emphasizing the entire meaning rather than making distinctions;
  - acrostics, i.e., in which the first letter of lines have significant, e.g., when they are ordered alphabetically.
4. Interpret the Proverbs as proverbs.
  - Proverbs are simplified and usually over-emphasized. They are true in their context but often have a limited context. Wisdom must also be applied in their application. A classic example is Proverbs 26:4-5 which gives apparently contrary instructions.
  - God is sovereign. He is not manipulated through the proverbs. Never-the-less there are proverbs which may be unconditional. E.g., the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.
  - Some proverbs describe a reality but do not prescribe what we are to do. E.g., Proverbs 17:8.
  - When seeking to understand the meaning of a word, look first at how it is used in other proverbs.
5. Take into account the purpose of the book as well as the biblical and Jewish context.
  - The Proverbs are not intended as a prescription for a smart life without God. The God of the wise is also the God of the Prophets and the Law. The Proverbs is also concerned with one’s relationship to God.
  - There is an historical and cultural context which should be observed.
  - Figurative speech should be understood as such and not taken in an excessively wooden fashion.
6. Determine first the meaning in the original context. Then you can make personal application based upon the original, intended meaning.
7. Read broadly in the Proverbs to become familiar with the contents. Focus narrowly on small bits to study, contemplate, and apply individual proverbs.