

God's Knowledge, Providence, and Wisdom: Proverbs

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Today will be the last sermon in this series through the book of Proverbs. I've really benefitted from the practical wisdom of Proverbs. As I lead my family and as I (along with others) lead this church I'm constantly reminded of my desperate need for God's wisdom. I need help in my marriage. I need help in the area of parenting. I need help in how to use my words in ways that are going to bless others. I need wisdom concerning work and money. I need wisdom about showing mercy to others and pursuing justice in the world. I need wisdom as to how to be a good friend. I hope you feel needy in these ways as well. I hope you are desperate for God's wisdom. I hope you desire to be a wise person rather than a fool.

These are the themes we've studied in Proverbs over the last several weeks. We talked about the fear of the Lord, wisdom and folly, words, friendship, sex and marriage, parents and children, work and money, mercy and justice . . . And this morning we're going to do one last study in Proverbs that will be a helpful segue back into our study of Romans. We'll be looking this morning at what Proverbs has to say about God's knowledge, providence, and wisdom.

Before this series on Proverbs I preached through Romans 1-8, and next week we'll begin Romans 9, which says a lot about God's sovereignty. And something that's so amazing to me is the diversity and unity of Scripture. Proverbs and Romans are about as different as you can get in terms of literary genres in the Bible. Proverbs is a compilation of these short, pithy statements that convey wise principles for our lives. Often these statements seem somewhat disconnected from one another as you're reading from verse to verse. Romans, in contrast, is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Rome, and Paul's presentation of the Gospel is very tightly argued. From one verse to the next, he is building his case, and responding to objections, and there's a very logical flow of thought through each section.

So as we look at some Proverbs which speak of God's sovereignty, we're going to see the beautiful unity of God's revelation to us in Scripture. The Proverbs are very different than Paul's letters, from a literary standpoint. But what we learn about God here is absolutely consistent with what we learn in Romans.

God's Knowledge

God knows all things. He has exhaustive knowledge of the past, present, and future. The fact that God has such knowledge should be a warning to us, because we can't fool ourselves that we're ever going to get away with anything. Like the kid who steals a cookie out of the cookie jar when mom and dad aren't looking. That never happens with God, because God sees everything.

In Proverbs 5, in the context of warnings against adultery, it says, "*For a man's ways are before the eyes of the LORD, and he ponders all his paths.*" (Proverbs 5:21, ESV) No sin or yours, no sin of mine, will ever go unseen by the Lord. That's a warning to guard our lives, guard our thoughts, guard our attitudes, because God sees every dimension of who we are.

"The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good." (Proverbs 15:3, ESV)

God sees and knows all things.

"Sheol and Abaddon lie open before the LORD; how much more the hearts of the children of man!" (Proverbs 15:11, ESV)

Sheol and Abaddon are references to the grave. Even death is fully known by God. Things that we cannot see, God has full knowledge of. And if He can see past the grave, how much more does He see our hearts.

This is a sobering reality that we need to consider. God knows everything about us. Nothing escapes Him. You might run, but you can't hide. All that you ever have done or ever will do is fully known by God. And in the end He will hold each person accountable.

This would be reason for despair if it were not for the cross of Jesus Christ. Apart from Christ, our sinful thoughts and actions would land us in hell. But by the glorious plan of the Gospel, our sins are washed away by the blood of Jesus. Part of the great promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31 is the Lord declaring, "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." That is Good News! God sees all of our sin, but for those who are in Christ, He remembers it no more.

God knows the past. He sees everything that is going on in the present. And He also completely knows the future. He not only knows the future, but ordains all that will come to pass.

God's Providence

“The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.” (Proverbs 16:1, ESV)

We plan and we speak, but ultimately what happens and what is said is ordained by God.

“The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.” (Proverbs 16:9, ESV)

“Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.” (Proverbs 19:21, ESV)

One of the things this should do for us is make us humble in our planning for the future. We *should* plan. It is wise to plan. But we must plan humbly. We must plan with an openness to our plans changing.

James, in the NT, gives us a good admonishment:

“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.” (James 4:13–16, ESV)

“If the Lord wills” is the mindset we need to have. Speaking this way, thinking this way, planning this way, with the banner of “If the Lord wills” over all of it . . . this attitude places us rightly in relation to God. Our knowledge is limited. God’s knowledge is exhaustive. So we do plan for the future, but we do so with the understanding that we know very little while God knows everything.

God knows the future. He even knows our future decisions.

Open Theism

There is an unbiblical view of God’s knowledge that is being taught in some so-called evangelical churches. The view is known as open theism. One of the basic tenets of Open Theism is that God does not have exhaustive foreknowledge. He does NOT know everything that will come to pass. They would say that God knows everything that is knowable. However, the future decisions of free creatures are not knowable, therefore even God cannot

know what you or I might choose to do tomorrow. Those future decisions don't yet exist, and therefore they cannot be known.

Let me give you an example from Greg Boyd, who is one of the proponents of this view, to show you how this view plays out pastorally. Boyd tells the story of a young woman who had dreams of becoming a missionary. And she met a wonderful man whom she married, and the two were planning to go on the mission field. But then the husband committed adultery and they got a divorce. And the woman went to her pastor to ask why God would allow such a thing to happen. Why would God lead her to marry this man if it was going to end up like this? Boyd responded by saying that God was just as surprised as she was. God was just as disappointed. He didn't see this coming. Therefore God is not to blame.

Here's another illustration from Boyd. He writes, "I know Christians frequently speak about "the purpose of God" in the midst of a tragedy caused by someone else. There was a young girl . . . at [the college I teach at] who was killed by a drunk driver, a lot of students were wondering what purpose God had in "taking her home." But this I regard to simply be a piously confused way of thinking. The drunk driver alone is to blame for the girl's untimely death. The only purpose of God in the whole thing is His design to allow morally responsible people the right to decide whether to drink responsibly or irresponsibly." (*Letters from a Skeptic* [Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1994], pp. 46-47).

It seems to me that this view is so eager to get God off the hook with regard to suffering, that it leaves us with a God who cannot help us in suffering and cannot give us hope in suffering.

So beware of teachers who would want to diminish God's knowledge or God's sovereignty because they're trying to protect God from being blamed for evil. We must affirm what the Bible affirms. God does no evil. He is not blameworthy in any way. Humans are responsible for the evil they do. But still, God knows and ordains all that comes to pass. He is in control, and that's why we can cling to Romans 8:28: "*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*"

Our Statement of Faith, from the 1689 London Baptist Confession, says this (among other things) about God's providence.

“God the good Creator of all things, in His infinite power and wisdom does uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, to the end for which they were created, according unto His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will; to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness, and mercy.”

Everything that is, everything that happens, is according to God’s good plan. There is certainly mystery in this, because we can’t discern why God would allow such horrible things to happen. But when we look to the bigger picture of God’s eternal plans, and when we look to Him in faith, we can rest in the fact that He is somehow working all of this together for the good of His children.

Let’s look at some of the things Proverbs says about this. First of all, God’s providence guides even seemingly random events.

“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.” (Proverbs 16:33, ESV)

This would be like rolling dice, so you can think about this the next time you’re playing a board game. Even the way the dice fall on the table and the numbers you get, even that is determined by the Lord. The little spinner that goes with our Shoots and Ladders game, or the cards that go with Candy Land, which we randomly shuffle . . . we might think it’s just luck that determines who wins the game. But it’s God who is ultimately in control.

Think about the minute detail of God’s providence. This means that He knows and determines just the way the dice will drop from the hand, and just the way they will hit the table, and how they will bounce and then settle.

Interestingly, in Acts 1:26, Jesus’ followers were going to appoint another apostle since Judas had killed himself. Do you remember how they made their decision? They had two men, and they were trying to decide on one of them. So they prayed for the Lord to show them who to choose, and then they cast lots, and the lot fell on Matthias.

Now, this is not to say that we should make decisions this way. This is not the way we choose church leaders. The event here in Acts 1 is an anomaly. In other places where elders or deacons are chosen, it’s not like this. But this simply shows us that even the casting of those lots was providential. God controls even the little, seemingly random events in life.

Secondly, God also controls kings and rulers.

“The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.” (Proverbs 21:1, ESV)

We can think of the most powerful individuals in the world, and we must remind ourselves that they are putty in the hands of the Lord. Their power is no match for God’s power. And their decisions to do this or that are exactly according to God’s providential plans.

Therefore, when leaders make good and wise choices, we can praise God for His mercy. And when leaders make harmful, unwise choices, we can be looking for how God is going to bring good even out of the worst situations.

This anticipates what we’ll be looking at in Romans 9 about Pharaoh.

“For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’” (Romans 9:17, ESV)

God has His purposes which we cannot fathom. He is guiding the decisions of rulers, both good and bad, for the great purpose of showing His power in order that His Name will be proclaimed in all the earth.

Connected with this is God’s providence over the wicked.

“The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.” (Proverbs 16:4, ESV)

This, too, makes us think of Pharaoh. God had ordained Pharaoh’s involvement in those events. The Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart. The Lord made Pharaoh for that day of trouble.

Finally, God’s providence also determines who is victorious and successful.

“The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the LORD.” (Proverbs 21:31, ESV)

We see here the human involvement, preparation, and effort, but we see God’s providence over all of that. We labor. We exert effort. But in the end, whatever measure of success we attain, it must be God who gets the credit. This refers specifically to battle, which makes us think of our military and our police force. Locally, here, we can thank God that nobody was hurt in the drug bust that happened on Steuben Street Wednesday evening. A

violent man was on the loose, and the police did their job and were able to catch him before he hurt anyone. And in the end, we say, “the victory belongs to the Lord.”

This verse applies generally in so many other ways as well. We make our plans, but the results belong to the Lord. When we share the Gospel and someone repents and believes, we give God all the credit. When we see the blessing of healthy relationships in our lives, we thank God for those blessings. Where there is financial provision, we attribute that to God. With any success in our lives, we must humbly recognize that the victory belongs to the Lord.

God’s Wisdom

The last thing I want to draw our attention to this morning is God’s wisdom. We’ve been studying through Proverbs with the hope of gleaning wisdom for our daily lives. But I want us to be reminded, as we come to the end of our study in Proverbs, that wisdom is not an impersonal force that somehow helps us to make better decisions. Wisdom, in fact, is a person.

Look with me at Proverbs 8. Several weeks ago, in the sermon on wisdom and folly, I pointed out how Proverbs personifies both wisdom and folly, presenting each as a woman who is calling individuals to follow her. The woman folly tries to entice people into wrongdoing. Lady wisdom, on the other hand, exhorts people to fear the Lord.

Proverbs 8:12-21

You see how wisdom is portrayed as a person. Now listen to the following verses, which speak of creation.

Proverbs 8:22-31

On verse 22 – “fathered” “created”

What does this make you think of? God’s act of creation. And who does this make you think of? Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Trinity, who was with the Father in eternity past and who was intricately involved in the work of creation. Indeed, God created through the Son, as the New Testament makes clear.

I’ll note one last time the unique genre of wisdom literature, and the principle of interpreting wisdom literature that we cannot press these statements too rigidly or literally. If we did that in Proverbs 8 we might come to the conclusion that Christ, the wisdom of God, at one time did not exist and then was brought into

being at some point just prior to creation. That is just how Arius argued in the 3rd century. He saw the connection between the person of wisdom in Proverbs 8 and the person of Jesus Christ. And Arius used Proverbs as grounds for denying the deity of Christ. Jesus Christ is not God, Arius claimed. He is a created being. Proverbs 8:22, “The Lord created me . . .”

But that’s not a legitimate interpretation of this passage. As one commentator points out, “even in its OT setting where Wisdom stands for Yahweh’s wisdom, we would be wrong to press the language of creation literally as if at some point God were not wise and only later became wise just in time to create the world.”¹ We need to recognize the poetic nature of this section. It’s a beautiful description of the role of God’s wisdom in creation. Then, with the fuller revelation of the NT we see that God’s wisdom has come to earth as a Person, our Lord Jesus Christ.

In Colossians 1 Paul seems to be reflecting on this very passage in Proverbs 8.

“[The Son] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (Colossians 1:15–17, ESV)

John 1 also points out Christ’s role in creation.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” (John 1:1–3, ESV)

“He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.” (John 1:10, ESV)

When we compare Proverbs 8 with these NT statements, we come to understand that Jesus Christ is God’s wisdom in the flesh. The eternal Son of God came to earth to live among us. He is God’s wisdom incarnated as a human being, the only perfect human being. And thus He is our supreme example of how to live. More importantly, He is the One who lived a perfect, wise life in our place.

¹ Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs*, page 212-3.

“And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,” (1 Corinthians 1:30, ESV)

Let’s look to His wisdom, trust His wisdom, and walk in His wise commands for us.

We have seen this morning, in our conclusion to this study in Proverbs: God’s knowledge, God’s providence, and God’s wisdom. We look forward next week to starting Romans 9 where we will continue to meditate on the mysterious and sovereign plans of God.