

Introduction – 1 – Proverbs and Jesus

Proverbs is all about Jesus.

You see him on every page.
That may sound a little strange at first,
because Proverbs appears at first blush
to be one of the least Christ-centered books in the Bible.

Proverbs doesn't talk much
about redemptive history, covenant, temple, sacrifice, kingdom –
the central themes of the Law and the Prophets.

Instead, Proverbs talks about *wisdom*.

What is wisdom?

The word has to do with *skill*.

A skilled craftsman knows more than just rules and techniques.

The wise craftsman understands the way things work –
and so is able to do beautiful things.

I remember watching my brother-in-law build the brick pillars for the sign out front.

He is a skilled mason.

He worked so slowly – or, that's what I thought at first.

Then I watched more carefully.

Every motion was made with care.

Each scoop with the trowel had *precisely* the same amount of mortar.

Each sweep of the hand placed the mortar in just the right place.

Then the brick was set carefully in place – the *right* place – the *first* time!

I started realizing that if *I* was building this post,

I would be making a colossal mess – and the thing would look awful!

Because when it comes to brick laying – I have *no wisdom* – I have no skill!

Watching a master craftsman is a delight.

Young people – I *urge you* – find skilled craftsmen – and watch them work!

Because *wisdom* is about how to *live* like that.

The central question of the book of Proverbs could be stated this way:

How does a father teach his son to live wisely in a world populated by fools?

The book of Proverbs is a sneak peek into the counsel of God the Father

as he speaks to his only begotten Son,

calling him to walk in the way of wisdom.

These are, after all, the Proverbs of *Solomon*.

Solomon was the son of David,

the one who inherited the anointing as the son of God.
Israel had been called to be God's son,
but Israel had rejected God – and in the days of the Judges,
everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

And so God called David to become what Israel had failed to be.
The sons of David have a Messianic identity
that reminded Israel of their filial identity.

Wisdom, righteousness, justice, and equity–
these are the hallmarks of a king–
of a Son of God who reflects his Father's wisdom and justice.

As we've gone through the Psalms we've seen how Israel sings the Psalms *in David*
(and so therefore, we sing the Psalms *in Christ*).
In the same way – Proverbs is also to be read *in Christ*.

Introduction – 2 – Proverbs and Daily Life

Proverbs is perhaps the most misused book in the Bible.

It's easy to do.

Proverbs are pithy statements that summarize a principle very neatly.

Therefore they make great "prooftexts"--
which soon get generalized into rules.

But proverbs *aren't* rules!

Proverbs 26:4-5 is my favorite example:

"Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.
Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes."

Try coming up with a hard and fast rule here!

(If you succeed, you have demonstrated that you have not learned wisdom!)

So which one are you supposed to do?

Are you supposed to answer a fool, or not?

This only causes difficulty if we are thinking in terms of *rules*.

Sometimes we think that if you just follow the rules,
that's what God wants.

It doesn't take a whole lot of figuring out,
just obey God!

But the Book of Proverbs is not designed to give you *rules* for everyday living,
rather these proverbs are designed to illustrate and teach Wisdom.

The wise man will know when to answer a fool according to his folly,
and when not to.

When I was a young pastor, I thought that “law” and “wisdom” were opposed to each other.
If you think that “law” just means a list of rules to obey –
then you don’t understand God’s law!

But also, there are some proverbs that will cure you of thinking of proverbs as rules:
For instance, Proverbs 19:4 –
“Wealth brings many new friends, but a poor man is deserted by his friend.”

Does that mean that you are supposed to abandon your friends if they are poor?
Of course not!
A proverb is not a rule for action,
but a description of the way the world *is*.

And of course, then there are the simplistic promises of the blessed life:
“The righteous has enough to satisfy his appetite,
but the belly of the wicked suffers want.” (13:25)

So the rich are righteous and the poor are wicked?
But wait–“better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife” (17:1)

So which is it?

And for that matter,
how do you deal with the seemingly haphazard arrangement of chapters 10-31?
Is the book of Proverbs just a grab bag of wise sayings?
Or does it have some deeper theological meaning?

I won’t try to answer all these questions tonight!
But we will at least start down the path toward wisdom.

The key to the book of Proverbs is found in the first 9 chapters.
As opposed to the seemingly random collections of chapters 10-31
(And I say “seemingly random,”
because there is certainly thought and order behind the arrangement),
Proverbs 1-9 has a clear structure and order.
Indeed, while there are many “proverbs” in the first 9 chapters,
these chapters are much more like “lectures” than mere “sayings.”
Proverbs 1-9 is set up as a father’s instruction to his son.

Many of you have children.
As your children grow,
what are you doing to prepare them to become wise and faithful adults?

Certainly a good education will be useful,
and there is no substitute for being a good example to them,
but are you teaching them wisdom?
Are you preparing them for how to live in a world that is not as it should be?

Proverbs 10-31 describes “the world.”

As you walk through Proverbs 10-31 you find some strange things.

“No ill befalls the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble.” (Prov. 12:21)
and yet, “a bribe is like a magic stone in the eyes of the one who gives it;
wherever he turns he prospers.” (Prov. 17:8)

You never know what is coming next:

there are proverbs about the tongue, about laziness, about doing what is right,
and about trusting the LORD in times of trouble.

Just like in real life—you never know what is coming next.

An editor could have divided the proverbs up into neat categories:
proverbs on wealth
proverbs on the tongue
proverbs comparing the wise man and the fool
etc.

But that would not fit the way life works.

Proverbs 10-31 meet us in the seemingly haphazard way that life happens.

1. The Purpose of Proverbs 1-9

This is why we are given Proverbs 1-9.

Proverbs 1-9 teaches wisdom to the simple,
so that the simple may become wise,
and therefore understand the rest of the book of Proverbs—
which means, understand how to live your daily life before God.

Indeed, that’s exactly what Proverbs 1:1-7 says Proverbs 1-9 is all about.

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:

This is the title of the book.

There are a few proverbs later on that are by other authors,
but the majority are by Solomon.

But before we get to the proverbs of Solomon,
we are given a prologue in the first 9 chapters to prepare us for the proverbs.

Verses 2-4 then give us the purpose of the first nine chapters.

² *To know wisdom and instruction,
to understand words of insight,*

³ *to receive instruction in wise dealing,*

in righteousness, justice, and equity;
⁴ *to give prudence to the simple,*
knowledge and discretion to the youth—

Do you want to know wisdom?

Do you want to learn “wise dealing”?

Do you want to know how to deal wisely and effectively with people?

Do you want to be able to make righteous, just, and fair decisions?

Then this book is for you!

And verse 4:

“To give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth...”

This identifies the primary target of this book.

The simple—the youths—those who will soon be placed in the middle of Proverbs 10-31,
in other words—in the middle of daily, adult life.

Of course others may well benefit from it:

⁵ *Let the wise hear and increase in learning,*
and the one who understands obtain guidance,

⁶ *to understand a proverb and a saying,*
the words of the wise and their riddles.

Not only the simple and the youths should pay attention,
but even the wise may add to their learning.

After all, a wise man never thinks that he has achieved all knowledge.

The more wisdom you have, the more you realize how much more wisdom you need!

“To understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles....”

In other words, if you listen to what I’m about to say,
you will learn how to understand Proverbs 10-31—
you will learn the secret to unlock the riddles of Solomon.

And what is that secret?!

⁷ *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;*
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

This statement opens Proverbs 1-9.

It will also close it in Proverbs 9:10

If you would learn wisdom,

if you would obtain knowledge,
then fear the LORD.

“Wisdom and knowledge are inseparable,
for mastery of life’s experience demands knowledge of the divine moral order.”

There is nothing in Proverbs about the mighty works of God in redemption.
The exodus from Egypt is never mentioned,
there are only throw-away references to offerings and sacrifices,
and the passing comments about kings
never speak of God’s promise to David.

But unlike other wisdom literature from the ancient world,
Proverbs is resolutely theological.
Proverbs uses the name of Yahweh over 100 times—the covenant name of God.
And like here in 1:7, Proverbs regularly roots wisdom
in the character and revelation of the LORD.
Proverbs assumes that you know your history.

You need to know what God has done in history to establish his people—
the covenant name of Yahweh reminds us
that it is not just any God whom we are to fear.
We are to fear the LORD.

2. The Fear of the LORD

What is the fear of the LORD?

The phrase occurs 21 times in the OT—14 times in Proverbs.
So we will encounter it again and again!

To fear the LORD means to submit to him.

It means that you are more concerned with what God thinks of you,
than with what others think of you.

The fear of the LORD is said to be “the beginning of knowledge.”

You will not understand how to live in God’s world unless you submit to him.

As Prov 2:4-6 says,

“If you seek wisdom like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures,
then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.

For the LORD gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.”

Think about that:

the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

So how do you find wisdom?

Fear the LORD.

Be more concerned with what God thinks of you –
than with what others think of you!

But how do you understand the fear of the LORD?
Seek wisdom!

It sounds circular.
To find wisdom, fear the LORD.
To understand the fear of the LORD, seek wisdom.

Where do you start?

Start with your father!
No one ever starts on a quest for wisdom in isolation.
The place where you learn the first principles of wisdom is at home.

But the language of “father” and “son” is not purely biological.
Any mentor becomes a sort of ‘father’ to the one he is teaching.

Think of how David says this in Psalm 34:11 –
“Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD”
He’s not just talking to *his children*.
David, as the LORD’s anointed, speaks to *all* God’s people
and calls them to listen to him as he teaches and trains.
Proverbs does not assume that every parent will be self-sufficient.
That is why even the “wise” are called to hear and increase in learning.

But Proverbs is designed as a manual for fathers,
as much as it is designed as a workbook for sons!

This is written for parents and teachers—those who will use this book in teaching their children.
It is, in that way, a manual of discipleship.

3. The Simple

Which brings us to the last question:
Who are “the simple” or “the youth”?

The word “youth” is used to refer to the infants Moses and Samuel (Ex 2:6 or 1 Sam 1:22, 24),
the 17-year old Joseph (Gen 37:2)
the 30-year old Joseph (Gen 41:12, 46)
and indeed, in Proverbs it is used of any age prior to being an “elder”
(zaqen: 17:6; 20:29).

The youths are on the threshold of maturity,
and they must choose for themselves to join the wise if they would obtain knowledge.

These “simple” are said to also “lack judgment.”
This means that they are neither wise, nor foolish,
but rather that they are in a dangerous middle ground--

a middle ground which will lead them to ruin unless they find wisdom first,
because as Proverbs 14:15 says,
"a simple man will believe anything,
but a prudent man gives thought to his steps."
To put it simply, to be simple is to be a fool just waiting to happen.

The simple in Proverbs is the young man who is easy prey to easy money and easy sex.
The default path of the simple, is the path of folly.
That is the way that they will end up going if they do not *pursue* wisdom.

But the simple is not *yet* a fool.
There is still hope for you!
And that hope is that you will learn the fear of the LORD.
That you will become more concerned with what God thinks of you,
than with what your friends think of you.
The difference between the simple and the fool is that simple is still teachable.

The fool is not.
"A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion" (18:2)
This is why in the early 2nd century, Ignatius praised Polycarp for his silence!
A pastor who knows when to keep his mouth shut is a rare and important thing!
We often accomplish far more by our silences than by our speeches.

After all, as Proverbs 17:28 puts it:
"even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise"!

Conclusion

So let us together walk along the path of wisdom,
as our Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God walked the path of wisdom
that his Father gave to him.
And let us learn from him,
the wise and faithful Son, who has become for us
wisdom from God and righteousness and sanctification.