

The Book of Proverbs, Part 1

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“The only wisdom by which you can handle everyday things in conformity with their nature is the wisdom by which they were divinely made and ordered. Proverbs 8, which states this superlatively, is therefore far from being a non-function pinnacle of the book’s eloquence, but is rather an exposure of the main framework of its thought.” — Derek Kidner, 32

Fox: Ch. 9, with Folly’s call, is an anticlimax after the glories of chapter 8. Me: Whenever wisdom calls, Folly’s call is right there too. Ending ch. 9 on a negative note is psychologically more realistic.

“God’s purposes are broader than simply saving sinners. . . God has seen fit to include a book like Proverbs which describes him as actively at work in shaping individuals and the community in accordance with his values, and giving much instruction for daily living.” — Wilson, 25-26

“Proverbs deals with the most fundamental skill of all: practical righteousness before God in every area of life.” — Open Bible

“The Proverbs are meant to be a guide to choosing the right way in a world full of sales pitches for the wrong way.” — Peter Kreeft

“Perhaps the main reason why the wisdom of the Proverbs is missing from the modern world is that its source, the fear of the Lord, is missing.” Ibid.

Sermon 1, An Introduction to Proverbs, Proverbs 1, 15:20-33

Proposition: Studying the ancient book of Proverbs will give you wisdom for today because Proverbs’ wisdom is a type of Christ the wisdom of God.

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I. Introduction: Proverbs and You

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we begin our study of the book of Proverbs this morning. Why Proverbs? First of all, because you asked for it. Over a period of time, two different families approached me and requested that I preach on Proverbs. As for why Proverbs when we have not finished Ephesians, the answer is that Ephesians is moving to the evening services, and I encourage you to come and listen to the second half of the series on it there. So why Proverbs? Partly we're looking at it by popular demand. But mostly, we're going after this book because we need wisdom. From a political angle, the folly of the American public generally and the American Christian voter in particular is only too plain to see. The history of the so-called Christian Right is enough to depress anyone who cares about Biblical morality, while the apparent inability of half the population of the USA to win a single campaign in the culture wars in should be evidence enough to all of us that our political folly needs to end. I'm not here to preach politics or culture. But the folly with which those in our camp have approached both is only too plain, no matter what your political and cultural views might be.

We don't just need wisdom in governing our nation, though. We need it for our states, counties, and cities. We need it, too, in the domestic realm. Folly is just as deadly at home as it is in the District of Columbia and on Wall Street. This book was given to us by God Himself for the purpose of teaching us wisdom. To study Proverbs is, in fact, just another way in which we can know Jesus Christ, who is the wisdom of God.

II. Proverbs and the Ancient Near East

Proverbs is what genre experts call a wisdom book. That is, it is a piece of writing which explicitly claims to impart wisdom to the one who reads it.

A. Similar Content

This type of writing flourished in the ANE. We know of at least two dozen other wisdom books of varying lengths written before Proverbs, and of half a dozen or more written after it. Most of them contain similar praises of wisdom and proverbs that give advice on how to behave in varying situations. The earliest examples come from almost 2000 years before the earliest

material in Proverbs, and proverbs continue to be written today. One of my favorite modern collections of them is *A Turn of the Clock*, by Peter Kreeft. Published in 1987, it contains gems like this: “We will master our planet before we master our tongue” (pg. 17) and “Never answer a person’s questions; answer the person” (pg. 18).

In short, the genre of proverb collections is a powerful and long-lasting one. Many of our most popular genres today — novels, for instance — are very short-lived in historical terms. The first time a genuine novel was written was in the 17th century. There were no novels in the ancient world or in the Middle Ages. But human beings have been writing proverbs down since 2700 B.C., and even today, we have folk sayings and English proverbs like “Marry in haste, repent at leisure” and “a stitch in time saves nine.”

Thus, when you read the Proverbs of Solomon, keep in mind that you are reading only the most famous example of a well-known genre. Wisdom literature is not unique to Israel or to the modern USA, but is found in every age and culture.

B. Different Foundations

But with that said, Proverbs puts an essential twist on the genre of wisdom. This book contains what no wisdom book previous to it had contained, and that is a new and different foundation for wisdom. In this book, wisdom is founded on the fear of God. Fearing God is the foundation, the beginning, the principle of wisdom. It is the first step on the vertical ladder of wisdom, the one that supports all the other steps. It is temporally prior to wisdom: you will never be wise until you fear God.

In the Egyptian wisdom books, indeed, it is recommended that one fear the gods because this is said to be a good idea and one that will bring prosperity. But fearing the gods is simply one virtue and good practice among many, and is no more important than honoring parents or being careful around the king. It is certainly not the foundation for everything else the book says. But here, in the Proverbs of Solomon, the fear of God is assigned its rightful place as the true bedrock on which wisdom must necessarily rest.

III. Proverbs and Wisdom

What is the wisdom that proverbs teaches? That can perhaps be seen best by reviewing the seven pillars of wisdom — that is, the seven sections into which the book is divided by subject headings within the text.

A. Proverbs Presents Wisdom’s Seven Pillars

It is ch.9, of course, which mentions that wisdom has hewn out seven pillars within her house. What is the point of that statement? It is simply to say that wisdom’s house is complete, that it is supported by the perfect number of pillars. And, of course, the fact that Proverbs is divided into seven sections also signals to us that it is complete, and that it contains all that it is supposed to contain. Interestingly, in terms of the numerology of the book the word “simple” (also translated “callow” or “gullible” or “naïf”) occurs fourteen times, as does the word “scoffer” or “mocker”. The word “sluggard” appears thirteen times, almost as though it was too lazy to quite make it to fourteen! We shouldn’t make too much of this, of course, but it is still worth noting that numbers

are used a structuring device throughout the OT and that number seven and its multiples are almost always there for a reason. Proverbs has given us a doubly perfect picture of the fool and the simple, and another almost doubly perfect picture of the scoffer. These mini portraits occur in the larger context of the seven sections of the book, which we will briefly summarize.

1. Prologue: Wisdom and Folly in the Home and the City, chs. 1-9

The first 9 chapters consist of longer poems which revolve around the themes of listening to your father's instruction and resisting the temptations of the strange woman and of wicked men. Interspersed with these are some monologues by Woman Wisdom, who calls out offering wisdom to passersby in the city. She is contrasted with the foolish woman, who calls out to fools and the naive and offers them stolen waters and clandestine bread. These longer sections clearly provide the context for the rest of the book. They tell us how to read it — as instructions from a father to his son, and as an appeal from Lady Wisdom to us simple ones. This prologue is similar to the format of wisdom books found in Egypt.

2. The Proverbs of Solomon, 10:1-22:16

The second pillar of wisdom begins at the beginning of ch. 10, and informs us that what we have here are the proverbs of Solomon. The first of these proverbs is deliberately tied back to the first lecture in 1:8, where the father and mother are both mentioned. They are mentioned again in the first proverb of the collection. Wisdom is something that parents should hope to instill in their children, and a foolish son is a heaviness to his mother! Around the joint between ch. 15 and ch. 16, this collection has a number of proverbs that mention the LORD, and some have noticed that the proverbs before the joint are mostly antithetic while the ones after it are more usually parallel. But regardless, this is still clearly a unified collection that pretty much consists of single-verse proverbs. They range over many topics and discuss many practical points of everyday experience. When you think of proverbs, this in particular is the section you think of.

3. The Thirty Sayings of the Wise, 22:17-24:22

Halfway through ch. 22 comes another heading, this one ascribing its sayings to “the wise.” There follows thirty sayings, most of them two or three verses in length, that resume the lecture format of the prologue. It seems that “30 Sayings” was a known genre of wisdom, because an Egyptian document called “The Wisdom of Amenemope” also contains 30 sayings.

4. Further Sayings of the Wise, 24:23-34

We then have a few more verses of “sayings of the wise” — i.e., presumably existing proverbs that Solomon found and added to his collection rather than ones he came up with himself. These sayings of the wise deal with behavior at work and behavior at court, and how to think and speak.

5. The Proverbs of Solomon, Part II, chs. 25-29

We then have more proverbs of Solomon. According to Kings, Solomon spoke 3000 proverbs, but this book only contains about 800 of them.

6. The Sayings of Agur, ch. 30

The sixth collection is the one-chapter confession of Agur, who challenges the reader to learn wisdom by understanding the name of God and the name of His Son. He then gives a collection of seven numerical sayings — “three things, yes, four.”

7. The Sayings of Lemuel, ch. 31

The final section is the last chapter, in which King Lemuel passes on the wisdom he learned from his mother. He learned how to rule, and to stay away from alcohol as a ruler — and then he speaks of the virtuous woman, whose price is above rubies. The book closes with a final reference to fearing Yahweh — a principle which is stated at the book’s beginning, middle, and end.

In short, Proverbs is collection of wise sayings and poems. It contains the distilled wisdom of Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived. I told you a few weeks ago about the rajah who wanted all the wisdom of the world boiled down to its most important parts. Well, here it is.

B. Proverbs Tells How to Get this Wisdom

Furthermore, though, Proverbs not only contains wisdom in itself. Fundamentally, it is interested in getting that wisdom inside you. Basically, there are two keys to getting wisdom.

1. Fear God, 1:7

The first of them is to fear God. You must have an overpowering reverence for the Almighty, one which will not let you do anything that you think He will disapprove of. That’s what it means to fear God. To fear Him is the foundation of knowledge and wisdom. We will talk more about that in a few weeks, but for now, recognize that to fear God and to know Him in all your ways is the key that unlocks all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

2. Study Proverbs, 1:2

Second, though, you must study Proverbs. This book is written to help you learn wisdom and the discipline it requires. Studying it until you get it is how you come to understand the words of insight, or literally to understand words of understanding. If you want your mental faculties to work such that you can make sense of God’s word, or of any words, then you need to be familiar with this book. After all, its second verse puts “knowing wisdom” and “knowing words” in parallel, and ch. 4 actually puts knowing wisdom in parallel with “knowing *my* words.” Do you want to know God’s words? Then study this book.

IV. Proverbs and the Lord Jesus Christ

Well, Proverbs is not only a book of human wisdom. Proverbs is book of divine wisdom. It is a book of the Bible, a book given by inspiration of God and therefore profitable to teach, rebuke, correct, and train.

A. The Type: Solomon’s Wisdom, ch. 8

It personifies wisdom so that we can see that wisdom is not merely static ideas, but is a wise, beautiful, and hospitable woman. Wisdom is someone you can fall in love with; wisdom is someone you can enjoy. Wisdom is also someone who will pour out her spirit on you by sharing

her words with you, and wisdom is someone who is willing to take time with the foolish and simple. This personification is a literary device, but it teaches us something profound.

B. The Antitype/Fulfillment: Christ the Wisdom of God, 1 Corinthians 1:24

You see, wisdom really is personal, not as a fine lady, but in the only begotten Son of God. He personifies for us all that the wisdom of God is. Solomon's personified wisdom is a type of the greater antitype, who is Jesus Christ. He is the true wisdom of God, and to know Him is to know the one whom God has made for us wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Do you know Christ as the wisdom of God? As we'll see in two weeks, if you don't, then you don't really know the wisdom of God. Christ sums up everything that Solomon was pointing toward. He is the greater fulfillment of what we see in Proverbs. As one commentator put it, He no more renders Proverbs obsolete than a \$20 bill renders a \$5 bill obsolete. He relativizes its value — but it's still valuable. Ultimately, it's valuable because it tells us how to live a life that is pleasing to the Lord who ransomed us for Himself. Do you know and love Jesus? Then seek to live wisely before Him with the help of this book He's given you. Amen.