

## PROVERBS: That Men May Know Wisdom

by Ray C. Stedman

No other book of the Old Testament appears to be quite as difficult to outline as the book of Proverbs. Like the dictionary, it seems to change the subject with every verse. As a matter of fact, though, the book of Proverbs is logically and helpfully constructed; and if you note the divisions of it, you can easily follow the argument of this book.

- Proverbs begins with a brief introductory preface in the first six verses.
- This is followed by a series of ten different discourses from a father to his son, filled with very practical exhortations on how to face some of the problems of life. That carries us over to the beginning of Chapter 10, and so far there have been no proverbs.
- But in Chapter 10 we have a collection of proverbs that are noted for us as the proverbs of Solomon, the wise king of Israel, the son of David. When Solomon became king he had a vision of God in which God asked him what his heart desired above everything else. Solomon asked that he be granted wisdom. Because he asked for this instead of riches or fame, God gave him all three. Therefore, these are the wisdom proverbs of the wisest king that Israel ever had. This second division runs through to –
- Chapter 25 which begins another collection of proverbs said to be the proverbs of Solomon which were copied down by the men of Hezekiah, the king of Judah, after Solomon's death.

- The book closes with a postlude in Chapters 30 and 31 that brings before us the words of two unknown individuals, Agur, son of Jakah, in Chapter 30, and Lemuel, king of Massa, in Chapter 31.

The book of Proverbs expresses the conclusion of the will of man. Together, the books of Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes give us the cry of the soul of man. In Psalms you have the emotional nature, which is one part of the soul function. Ecclesiastes deals with the function of the mind – the search of man's reason throughout the earth, analyzing, evaluating, weighing, and concluding on the basis of what is discoverable under the sun, that is, by human reason. But in the book of Proverbs we have the appeal to the will of man and the conclusion of the will; therefore, this book is all about the things man should decide, the choices of life. This is beautifully set before us in the introduction to the book.

First, there is a title in Verse 1:

**The proverbs of Solomon, son of David,  
king of Israel. {Prov 1:1 RSV}**

And then we read the purpose of the book (Verses 2-6):

**That men may know wisdom and instruction,  
understand words of insight,  
receive instruction in wise dealing,  
righteousness, justice, and equity;  
that prudence may be given to the simple,  
knowledge and discretion to the youth –**

**the wise man also may hear and increase in learning,  
and the man of understanding acquire skill,  
to understand a proverb and a figure,  
the words of the wise and their riddles.  
{Prov 1:2-6 RSV}**

In other words, this is designed for man in every division and age of his life, from childhood through youth and maturity, in order to understand what life is all about. The book of Proverbs is very practical and is recommended especially for those who are just beginning to try to solve some of the mysteries of life. Also, if you are just moving out for the first time into contact with the world and its ways and mysteries, this is an excellent book of admonition.

Verse 7 gives the key to the whole book. And, since Proverbs is the book that deals with life, this is also the key verse to all of life and is one of the greatest verses in the Bible. It states the summary and conclusion of this book:

**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge [or wisdom];  
fools despise wisdom and instruction.  
{Prov 1:7 RSV}**

This whole book approaches life from the position that God has all the answers – God is all-wise; God knows everything. There is nothing that is hidden from his knowledge. He understands all mysteries, sees the answer to all riddles. He sees below the surface of everything. Therefore, the beginning of wisdom is to reverence and fear God.

The “fear of the Lord” mentioned in the Old Testament isn’t a craven sort of fear that God is going to do something to you. There are two kinds of fear:

- There is the fear that God might hurt us, a fear experience by those who are trying to run from God.
- But the fear spoken of here is the fear that we might hurt him – that something we do might offend him or might grieve his loving heart in concern for us.

This word *fear* really means “reverence or respect.” Obviously, if God has all the answers, then the one who has the key to life is the man or woman, boy or

girl, who learns early to respect God and believe him and understand that he tells us the truth.

The greatest thing in my Christian experience is that here in the book of God I have found the truth. I can’t trust many of the other sources from which I get information and counsel and advice. I have found, through very sad experience sometimes, that what I thought was right was very wrong. But here is the source of truth – God has spoken. Therefore, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. It is not the end; it is the beginning. And only the man who has in his heart a continuing respect for God’s wisdom can begin properly to evaluate and understand life.

In Chapter 1, Verse 8, you have the beginning of the ten discourses to a son from his father. They begin with the child in the home, dealing with his first relationships. Then they move to the time when the child begins to broaden his experience and widen the circle of his understanding and make friends. There are very wise and helpful words here concerning a youngster’s choice of friends, pointing out the powerful influence friends can have at this age. Therefore, the most important thing for a child to learn as he grows up is how to evaluate and choose his friends.

Then, in Chapter 3, you have the young man as he grows up and leaves home. As he makes his way into the city, he is immediately confronted with all kinds of pressures and temptations. There is a thoughtful word of warning here concerning some of the temptations he will meet. It speaks very delicately and yet frankly about the pressures of sex and about what wrong steps in response to these pressures can do to a life. Also, there is an admonition concerning getting involved in wrong financial transactions. These are very practical warnings. The whole of this section is summed up in Chapter 3, Verses 5 and 6:

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart,  
and do not rely on your own insight.  
[There never was more valuable advice  
given to youth than that!]  
In all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he will make straight your paths.  
{Prov 3:5-6 RSV}**

This is a word to the young man or woman who wants to find the secret of life, who wants to be a success. I have never yet met young people who

didn't want to be successful. In my experience with young people no one has ever said, "My ambition is to be a bum down on skid row." The way to success is to trust in the Lord with all your heart, and although God has given you reason and expects you to use it, don't rely on that as the final answer. Where God's word or God's ways have shown you something different, trust that instead of what you feel. Here is the result (Verses 6-8):

**In all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he will make straight your paths.  
Be not wise in your own eyes;  
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.  
It will be healing to your flesh  
and refreshment to your bones.**  
{Prov 3:6-8 RSV}

How I wish that someone had given me those verses when I first began to move out into the world.

A young man sat in my study not long ago and told me a heartbreaking story. When he left his home and moved out into the city, he did what he thought was right and what he hoped would supply fulfillment to his life. But he drifted downward and got involved in dope until he was mainlining heroin and experimenting with LSD, having fantastic hallucinations. He ended up as a procurer for a prostitute on the streets of San Francisco before God suddenly awakened him and he realized what had happened.

That is the kind of thing that the writer of Proverbs is seeking to avoid by pointing out that life can never be understood except in relationship to God. Life is simply too big for us to handle by ourselves. No matter how good the advice seems to be, if it isn't consistent with what God has told us, it is not to be trusted. And that is the conclusion that is reached through these opening chapters. Chapters 8 and 9 personify the two ways of life. Wisdom is seen as a beautiful woman, calling those who follow her to come away into the place of victory and achievement and success in life, while folly, or foolishness, which thinks everything it does is right in its own eyes, is personified as an evil woman – attractive, alluring, tempting us to step aside into death. It is a marvelously beautiful poetic passage.

Beginning with Chapter 10 we have this first collection of the wisdom of Solomon – all very pithy, practical words of advice covering every

possible situation of life. Therefore, this is a book that ought to be read again and again, until its wisdom permeates your life. Much of it will be committed to the mind and memory, and you will be able to recall it in times of pressure.

This first collection is made up mostly of contrasts, in which the writer sets two things side by side and shows the good and evil results of various attitudes and actions. As you read this section through, you will see these antitheses. For example, in Chapter 10, Verse 10:

**He who winks the eye causes trouble,  
but he who boldly reproves makes peace.**  
{Prov 10:10 RSV}

That, of course, is the contrast between the sly, deceitful, stealthy look that is expressed in a wink, in contrast to the man who frankly and forthrightly speaks his mind, even though what he says is not very welcome. But the result of that kind of frankness is peace.

Also in Chapter 10, Verse 26, is a very expressive proverb:

**Like vinegar to the teeth, and smoke to the eyes,  
so is the sluggard to those who send him.**  
{Prov 10:26 RSV}

Any parent who has sent his child on an errand and the child has dawdled along the way knows what this means. As vinegar sets the teeth on edge and smoke burns the eyes, so is the man who is entrusted with a message who dawdles along the way.

Chapter 11, Verse 22, is descriptively practical:

**Like a gold ring in a swine's snout  
is a beautiful woman without discretion.**  
{Prov 11:22 RSV}

Can you imagine that? An ugly pig with swill dripping from its mouth and a gold ring affixed to its nostrils! Gold signifies value – but in the wrong place. So is a beautiful woman who hasn't learned that beauty is not the outward form but the inward beauty of spirit.

**One man gives freely, yet grows all the richer;**

**another withholds what he should give,  
and only suffers want. {Prov 11:24  
RSV}**

There is the value of generosity over stinginess.  
Then, in Chapter 12, Verse 4:

**A good wife is the crown of her husband,  
but she who brings shame is like rotten-  
ness in his bones. {Prov 12:4 RSV}**

These are self explanatory, aren't they?

Verses 16 through 22 give a little discourse on  
the tongue and the dangers and the blessings of it:

**The vexation of a fool is known at once,  
but the prudent man ignores an insult.  
{Prov 12:16 RSV}**

That is, a fool blurts out what he feels and never  
tries to control himself. He simply reacts to every-  
thing that comes along. But the prudent man learns  
to control himself, ignoring insults, and moving to  
the heart of the matter.

Chapter 12, Verses 18-19, 22:

**There is one whose rash words are like  
sword thrusts,  
but the tongue of the wise brings healing.  
Truthful lips endure forever,  
but a lying tongue is but for a moment.  
{Prov 12:18-19 RSV}**

**Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord,  
but those who act faithfully are his de-  
light. {Prov 12:22 RSV}**

Then, in Chapter 13, Verse 24, is that well-  
known verse for parents:

**He who spares the rod hates his son,  
but he who loves him is diligent to disci-  
pline him. {Prov 13:24 RSV}**

That is the basis for the saying, "This hurts me  
more than it does you."

Chapter 14, Verse 12, again refers to the un-  
derlying secrets of life.

**There is a way which seems right to a man  
[And how often we think that we know  
the answers! But the whole counsel of  
this book is that our own reason and  
wisdom are never enough],**

**but its end is the way of death. {Prov  
14:12 RSV}**

Therefore, "Trust in the Lord and lean not to your  
own insight" {cf, Prov 3:6}, that is the application.  
Then Chapter 14, Verse 31:

**He who oppresses a poor man insults his  
Maker,  
but he who is kind to the needy honors  
him. {Prov 14:31 RSV}**

Here is the word on the need to recognize the unity  
of life. The "I - It" relationship is an insult to  
someone. The "I - Thou" is the only thing that ex-  
presses the concern of a Christian.

Chapter 15, Verse 11:

**Sheol and Abaddon lie open before the  
Lord,  
how much more the hearts of men! {Prov  
15:11 RSV}**

What a wonderful way to say that the deepest  
mysteries of life are known to God. We don't un-  
derstand Sheol. We don't know what Abaddon –  
the pit – involves, but God does. How much more  
does he know the secrets of the human heart, and  
can tell us the right way.

Verse 17 of the same chapter is very pointed:

**Better is a dinner of herb's where love is  
than a fatted ox and hatred with it. {Prov  
15:17 RSV}**

Who would not prefer to sit down at a table where  
there is only bread and water but a wonderful at-  
mosphere of love, than to a table loaded with  
goodies where everyone growls at each other?

Chapter 16, Verse 13:

**Righteous lips are the delight of a king,  
and he loves him who speaks what is  
right. {Prov 16:13 RSV}**

There are other verses in Proverbs about a  
king. When you read them, remember that God  
looks at every man as a king; therefore, this is  
about you. God sees you as a king over the king-  
dom of your life. If you read with this perspective,  
these words on rulership and kingship will be of  
great profit to you.

Verses 20 and 22 link together:

**He who gives heed to the word will prosper,  
and happy is he who trusts in the Lord.  
Wisdom is a fountain of life to him who has  
it,  
but folly is the chastisement of fools.  
{Prov 16:20, 22 RSV}**

And what is wisdom? Well, it is stated in Verse 20, "He who gives heed to the word shall prosper."

In Chapter 16, Verse 32 is one that many of us need to hear:

**He who is slow to anger is better than the  
mighty,  
and he who rules his spirit than he who  
takes a city. {Prov 16:32 RSV}**

That verse is often quoted but seldom believed. What a change it would make in life if we really understood that the man who learns to control his anger and subdue his own spirit, by God's grace, is a greater hero than the man who takes a city.

Chapter 17, Verse 15:

**He who justifies the wicked and he who  
condemns the righteous  
are both alike an abomination to the  
Lord. {Prov 17:15 RSV}**

Yet how often we fall into that error – justifying the wicked and making excuses for people who do wrong, condemning the righteous and finding fault with them.

Verse 28 of the same chapter is very wise:

**Even a fool who keeps silent is considered  
wise;  
when he closes his lips, he is deemed in-  
telligent. {Prov 17:28 RSV}**

Or, as someone has well put it, "It is much better to remain silent and let everybody think you are a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt."

Chapter 18, Verse 8:

**The words of a whisperer are like delicious  
morsels;  
they go down into the inner parts of the  
body. {Prov 18:8 RSV}**

There is the explanation of why we love to gossip. What sweet morsels these are. How we love to

sink our teeth into the reputation of another; how good it tastes, and yet how evil to do.

Then in Verse 22 there is a word for lovers:

**He who finds a wife finds a good thing,  
and obtains favor from the Lord. {Prov  
18:22 RSV}**

This from a man who had a thousand of them!

Verse 24:

**There are friends who pretend to be  
friends,  
but there is a friend who sticks closer  
than a brother. {Prov 18:24 RSV}**

This is a reminder that there is one who will tell you the truth, even if it hurts, and that is God. There are many friends who will tell you anything they think you want to hear, but they are no friends.

Chapter 19, Verse 3:

**When a man's folly brings his way to ruin,  
his heart rages against the Lord. {Prov  
19:3 RSV}**

Isn't that strange? When a man's own foolishness brings him into trouble, who does he blame? The Lord. Or, if he is married, he takes it like a man and blames it on his wife, as Adam did in the Garden.

Chapter 20, Verse 9:

**Who can say, "I have made my heart clean;  
I am pure from my sin"? {Prov 20:9 RSV}**

That is a question that no one can answer, but anyone who asks it honestly is on his way to finding the Savior.

And Verse 27 of that same chapter is one of the most important verses in the Bible on understanding human life:

**The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord,  
searching all his innermost parts. {Prov  
20:27 RSV}**

That is what God made our spirits for: Our essential nature is to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit. He is the light. We are the lamp. When the lamp of the spirit holds the light of the Holy Spirit he searches the innermost part of a life and we begin to understand ourselves for the first time.

Chapter 21, Verse 9, gives a straightforward comment from a married man:

**It is better to live in a corner of the house-top  
than in a house shared with a contentious woman. {Prov 21:9 RSV}**

And Verses 30 and 31 of the same chapter:

**No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel,  
can avail against the Lord.  
The horse is made ready for the day of battle,  
but the victory belongs to the Lord. {Prov 21:30-31 RSV}**

God overrules. Someone once said to Napoleon, "Man proposes but God disposes." Napoleon, in his arrogant ignorance, replied, "No, Napoleon proposes and Napoleon disposes!" That was before the battle of Waterloo.

Chapter 22, Verse 6 is a famous verse:

**Train up a child in the way he should go,  
and when he is old he will not depart from it. {Prov 22:6 RSV}**

I think this should really be translated, "Train up a child according to his way," which means "find out what is in a child and bring him up so that what God has hidden in him may be developed and brought out. And when he is old he will not depart from that."

Verse 16 ends this type of contrasting proverb.

Beginning with Verse 17 of Chapter 22, a different kind of proverb is brought before us. These are general discourses, two or three verses long, upon various subjects, and there are some very helpful words in this section. For instance, Chapter 23, Verses 13-14:

**Do not withhold discipline from a child;  
if you beat him with a rod, he will not die.  
[He may sound like it, but he won't be dying.]  
If you beat him with the rod  
you will save his life from Sheol. {Prov 23:13-14 RSV}**

That advice is for small children. When you talk about adolescents, that is a different thing; they may be bigger than you are.

Chapter 24, Verses 28-29 give a practical word on relationships with your neighbor:

**Be not a witness against your neighbor without cause,  
and do not deceive with your lips.  
Do not say, "I will do to him as he has done to me;  
I will pay the man back for what he has done." {Prov 24:28-29}**

Even here, you see, is a clear recognition of the golden rule.

In Chapter 25 the second collection of proverbs begins – those copied by the men of Hezekiah. Verse 2 is a wonderful one:

**It is the glory of God to conceal things,  
but the glory of kings is to search things out. {Prov 25:2 RSV}**

If you want to have a royal experience, I suggest you start searching out things that God has concealed in his Word. That is the glory of kings – to find what God has hidden.

Verse 17 of that chapter:

**Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house,  
lest he become weary of you and hate you.  
{Prov 25:17 RSV}**

Very practical.

Chapter 26, Verse 2:

**Like a sparrow in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying,  
a curse that is causeless does not alight.  
{Prov 26:2 RSV}**

Therefore, if somebody says something nasty about you and it is not true, don't worry about it. Nobody will believe it. Those who do are not important.

This chapter has some very helpful words about troublesome people in general:

- In Chapter 26, Verses 3 through 12 there is a series on fools and how to handle them.
- Verses 13 through 16 tell what to do about sluggards and what is wrong with lay people.

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- Verses 17 through 23 concern meddlers and how to handle them.
- Then, Verse 24 to the end of the chapter is about the loveless – those who hate.

As we skim through quickly, we read this in Chapter 28, Verse 27:

**He who gives to the poor will not want,  
but he who hides his eyes will get many a  
curse. {Prov 28:27 RSV}**

No man is an island. We must not shut ourselves away from life. Those people who say they are too sensitive to visit the slums are coming under the condemnation of the truth in this verse. We need to see what life is like around us.

Chapter 29, Verse 1 is an often-quoted one:

**He who is often reprov'd, yet stiffens his  
neck  
will suddenly be broken beyond healing.  
{Prov 29:1 RSV}**

Then, in Chapter 30 you have the words of Agur. No one knows exactly who this man was, but the words are very practical, concerning some of the wonders of the earth. And in Chapter 31 the

words of King Lemuel are recorded, concerning what his mother taught him on how to be a king. The last of the book is a wonderful description of a virtuous woman. Many feel this is King Lemuel's description of his own mother – and what a woman she was! If you are a young girl looking for a model woman, I recommend this passage to you. If you are a young man looking for a model wife, I suggest you read it through. It sets forth marvelously the strength and glory and beauty of womanhood and the unique contribution that women can make to life.

This is the book of Proverbs. You might read it through once a month. It has thirty-one chapters, which would fit every month that has thirty-one days. One chapter a day will do it. Why not try it?

**Prayer:**

Thank you, our Father, for this very practical book and for the admonition it gives our hearts to remember that life can never be understood, can never be handled, can never make sense until we approach it with trust in you and remember that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. We thank you in Christ's name. Amen.

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