

# Living Wisely in God's World

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## *Studies in the Book of Proverbs*

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### 1. Why Study Proverbs?

#### Overview of the Book of Proverbs

1:1–7	Introduction
1:8–9:18	Praise of Wisdom
10:1–20:16	Proverbs of Solomon (970–930 BC)
22:17–24:22	Words of the Wise
24:23–34	More Words of the Wise
25:1–29:27	More Proverbs of Solomon (Collected by Hezekiah 715–686 BC)
30:1–33	Words of Agur
31:1–9	Words of King Lemuel
31:10–31	The Good Wife

#### Wisdom in the Bible

Three streams in Israel's life:

instruction shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet (Jer. 18:18).

Proverbs is part of the wisdom stream, along with Ecclesiastes and Job (carried on later in the apocryphal books of Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus). A different style of teaching from the commands of the law and the direct injunctions of the prophet. Gets under our guard with clever or catchy sayings, striking images and juxtapositions, teasing riddles, appeals to common sense—gets us thinking.

The thread of wisdom is found throughout the Old Testament. Israel's law and relationship with God distinguished them as wise among the nations of the world:

You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people" (Deut. 4:6).

Joseph, as an Israelite ruler in Egypt, was distinguished as wise:

Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the spirit of God?" So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you" (Gen. 41:38–39).

Daniel likewise in Babylon:

Blessed be the name of God from age to age,  
for wisdom and power are his.  
He changes times and seasons,  
deposes kings and sets up kings;

he gives wisdom to the wise  
and knowledge to those who have understanding.  
He reveals deep and hidden things;  
he knows what is in the darkness,  
and light dwells with him.  
To you, O God of my ancestors,  
I give thanks and praise,  
for you have given me wisdom and power (Dan. 2:20–23).

the people who are loyal to their God shall stand firm and take action. The wise among the people shall give understanding to many (Dan. 11:32–33).

Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever (Dan. 12:3).

The Psalms are shot through with similar themes.

In the New Testament, Jesus brings wisdom to perfection with his pithy sayings and intriguing parables—‘something greater than Solomon is here!’ (Matt. 12:42). He himself is characterised as ‘wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption’ (1 Cor. 2:30). God’s strange and good purpose is that ‘through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places’ (Eph. 3:10).

### **Proverbs Tells Us about God, and Living God’s Way**

Proverbs is more than just a collection of worldly-wise sayings, such as we might expect from a ‘how to’ book or a motivational speaker. The God who made the heavens and earth knows how they work, and He makes this known. He is also the Redeemer, working to bring His creation to its goal. ‘The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight’ (Prov. 9:10). In the 100 mentions of God in Proverbs, 88 use the covenant-name of the God who rescued Israel from Egypt and brought them to Himself (Exod. 3:14–15; 19:4). ‘Fear’ here has much to do with obedience to God and His law, and a healthy and wholesome regard for moral consequences. It is ‘the beginning of knowledge’, ‘hatred of evil’, ‘the beginning of wisdom’, and ‘a fountain of life’ (Prov. 1:7; 8:13; 9:10; 14:27). ‘Knowledge’ here is relational, and intimate:

For the LORD gives wisdom;  
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;  
he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;  
he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly,  
guarding the paths of justice  
and preserving the way of his faithful ones.  
Then you will understand righteousness and justice  
and equity, every good path;  
for wisdom will come into your heart,  
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;  
prudence will watch over you;  
and understanding will guard you.  
It will save you from the way of evil . . . (Prov. 2:6–12).

‘then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God’ (Prov. 2:5)—‘the two classic Old Testament terms for true religion—the poles of awe and intimacy’.<sup>1</sup> At the core of it:

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester England, Illinois USA, 1964, p. 61.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,  
and do not rely on your own insight.  
In all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he will make straight your paths.  
Do not be wise in your own eyes;  
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.  
It will be a healing for your flesh  
and a refreshment for your body (Prov. 3:5–8).

The purpose given for 'The words of the wise' could well apply to the whole book of Proverbs:

So that your trust may be in the LORD,  
I have made them known to you today—yes, to you (Prov. 22:19).

True wisdom is knowing the One 'who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will' (Eph. 1:11):

The human mind may devise many plans,  
but it is the purpose of the LORD that will be established (Prov. 19:21).

While this is the assumed basis, for the most part it is not explicit. We don't always have to keep saying 'The Lord *this*' and 'The Lord *that*'—sometimes that can indicate a measure of uncertainty and a constant need for reassurance. Knowing the Lord, in a right relationship with Him, we can simply get on with the business of living.

### **Proverbs is where Faith Intersects with Living in the World**

'Proverbs . . . is a book that seldom takes you to church. Like its own figure of Wisdom, it calls across to you in the street about some everyday matter, or points out things at home. Its function in Scripture is to put godliness into working clothes; to name business and society as spheres in which we are to acquit ourselves with credit to our Lord, and in which we are to look for his training . . . the wisdom of God is as relevant to the shopping-centre (8:2, 3) as to heaven itself (8:22)'.<sup>2</sup>

This is where faith intersects with the world—domestic and international politics included:

By me kings reign,  
and rulers decree what is just;  
by me rulers rule,  
and nobles, all who govern rightly (Prov. 8:15–16).

God said to Solomon, 'Ask what I should give you', and Solomon asked for 'an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil'. God willingly responded: 'Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you'. After that, 'All Israel . . . stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice' (1 Kings 3:5, 9, 12, 28).

God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore . . . He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish (1 Kings 4:29, 32–33).

Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda,

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<sup>2</sup> Kidner, pp. 35, 76. For more on business and finance, see Study 3.

children of Mahol; his fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations . . . People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom (1 Kings 4:30-31, 34).

Solomon's writings are not the only ones included in the book of proverbs. Alongside the two collections of Solomon's proverbs are two other collections entitled 'The words of the wise' (22:17-24:22), and 'These also are the sayings of the wise' (24:23-34). Added to these are 'The words of Agur son of Jakeh' (30:1-33), and 'The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him' (31:1-9). The sources of these sayings are by no means necessarily Israelite: 'Lemuel' is the name of no known king in Israel—just as Job was 'a man in the land of Uz'. There was much interplay in this field between Israel and its neighbours.

The wisdom in Proverbs is not just for our own personal use. It is part of what we have to offer to the world, in mutual interaction.

### **Living in Families**

I used to think there was rather little in the Bible about raising families—until I realised that the entire format of Proverbs is teaching and advice of parents to their children (Prov. 1:8; 6:20-22; 10:1; 19:27; 22:6; 23:22-25; 31:1). It is a practical exposition of the heart of Israel's law (Deut. 6:4-9) that was to be heard by parents and children alike (Josh 8:35; Neh. 8:1-3), and an application of the commandment with a promise (Exod. 20:12; Eph. 6:2). Discipline of children (Prov. 13:24; 23:13-16; 29:17) is to be in the light of God's disciplining of us as our Father (3:11-12; compare Heb. 12:5-11; Eph. 4:6; 6:1-4; Col. 3:20-21).

### **Outline of the Studies**

October	16	Why Study Proverbs?
	23	Wisdom and Righteousness
	30	Business, Finance and Public Life
November	6	The Scoffer and the Sluggard
	13	Mature Common Sense in God's Creation
	20	Friendship, Marriage and Sexual Ethics, Christ our Wisdom
		(Unavailable November 27)