

## PROVERBS – THE PATH TO WISDOM

### The Book of Proverbs - The Structure and Plan

#### INTRODUCTION

Do you hate it when your neighbour wakes you up too early in the morning? What do you think when you're in a room where someone is talking too much? Do you answer a foolish person, or do you not answer a foolish person? Have you ever lived with someone that reminds you of a dripping tap? Have you ever had company that over-stayed their welcome?

The Old Testament Book: Proverbs is full of such wisdom. This morning I want to introduce you to this unique piece of Biblical literature. How intend to go through what might be called a W5 approach – sort of a what, who, where, etc. At each heading I want to give you a practical application.

#### WHERE?

In the Old Testament, the first 5 books are called *foundational*. They are intended to teach Israel what is expected of them. The next 12 books (up to Esther) give a *historical* record of how Israel attempted to live out those expectations. The rest of the Old Testament is made up of wisdom literature and prophetic literature which records God's correction of Israel. Within the 3 primary books that are classed as *wisdom literature* there are the books of Job, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs. Together they are a collection. Proverbs does not stand alone.

#### Application.

This is important to know because you will struggle understanding proverbs unless you see it as part of the *wisdom* section, and as part of the *corrective* portion of the Old Testament. It is also part of the whole, unified canon of Scripture. (I'll show that in my last point.) For example, we read in Proverbs 21:21 (ESV) that <sup>21</sup> *Whoever pursues righteousness and kindness will find life, righteousness, and honor.* The wisdom of Job brings that proverb into focus. Remember, *“There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.”* (Job 1:1, ESV). Proverbs indicates that if we pursue righteousness our life will be wonderful. Proverbs by nature are “the general rule”, but they don't leave room for exceptions. To apply proverbs, we must also leave room for the loving providence of God. God in His loving and wise sovereignty made an exception of Job. That's why we need to always interpret wisdom literature within the whole realm of the Bible. That's the first point of application: apply Proverbs in light of the whole canon of Scripture.

#### WHAT?

We live in a society that loves sayings and memes. Open any social media and you will find lots of little proverbs. Here's a cultural proverb: "A good laugh and a good night's sleep are the two best cures for anything." No one in their right mind would agree with that statement, verbatim, absolutely. But it does make you think. It makes you think about the role of laughter and a good night's sleep in your life.

I believe Paul Koptak is right when he writes, "In sum, readers of the book of Proverbs must keep in mind that its proverbs are never simple ancient deposits of wisdom; rather, they are sayings designed to provoke a response in those who hear them and relate them to life."<sup>1</sup> This is what the Hebrew word *mašal* implies. A proverb stimulates thought and insight.<sup>2</sup> A proverb isn't an end to itself. It's intended to make us think. Think of this: "A man who is kind benefits himself, but a cruel man hurts himself." (Proverbs 11:17, ESV). Just think of that! This should provoke careful thought and contemplation.

The difference between proverbs from life coaches, bloggers, social media participants, etc. etc., is this: The Book of Proverbs is "God-breathed" wisdom.<sup>3</sup> That makes a world of difference.

Here is my working definition of Proverbs:

**The Book of Proverbs is a God-inspired collection of sayings that normally prove true, that always provoke us to careful thought and insight, that demand, in all cases the qualifier, "if the Lord wills".**

## WHO?

"The book tells us that it is the work of several authors. Three of these are named (Solomon, Agur and Lemuel), others are mentioned collectively as 'Wise Men', and at least one section of the book (the last) is anonymous."<sup>4</sup>

Solomon is certainly the prominent author and maybe even the one that put the collection together. We read the honorable request that Solomon made to the Lord upon his father's death in our Scripture lesson. In 1 Kings we read:

*"And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east . . . He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. . . . people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom."* (1 Kings 4:29–34, ESV)

## Application

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<sup>1</sup> Koptak, P. E. (2003). *Proverbs* (p. 22). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>2</sup> Koptak, P. E. (2003). *Proverbs* (p. 22). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>3</sup> Koptak, P. E. (2003). *Proverbs* (p. 22). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>4</sup> Kidner, D. (1964). *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (Vol. 17, p. 22). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

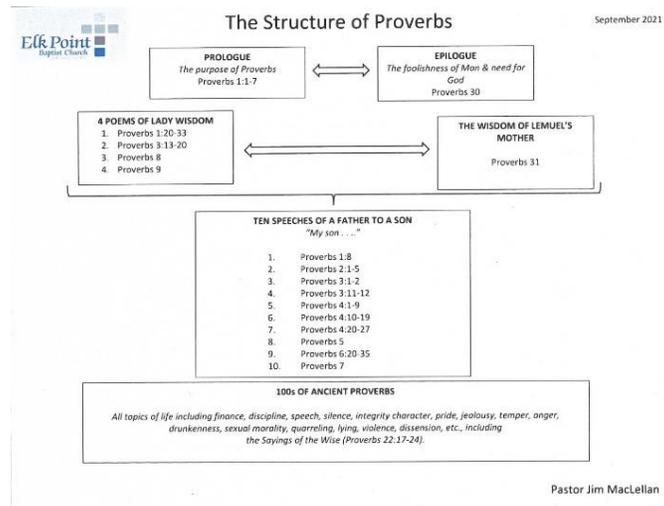
Why is this important? It is important because of the key text in Proverbs, “*“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”* (Proverbs 1:7, ESV). To understand and apply God-inspired proverbs, it takes a pre-condition of our hearts: *the fear of the Lord*. For Old Testament authors the “fear of the Lord” implied there was one perfect, universal Ruler and to understand His will requires that we first and foremost bow our hearts before Him in honor and submission. The “fear of the Lord requires that we remove ourselves as the center of authority in our self-made universes.”<sup>5</sup> I don’t decide what is right or wrong. God does.

Application

The fear of the Lord also includes reverent obedience. The fear of the Lord also includes the idea that the goal of this obedience is the glory of God. To pick up and read the Book of Proverbs, hoping to gain wisdom, and blessing in your life and not be living in the fear of the Lord is a recipe for failure. So, before we study this Book we do a heart-check. For it is said “*Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.*” (Proverbs 4:23, ESV).

HOW?

Dr Bruce Waltke, a recognized skilled workman in Hebrew wisdom literature wrote, “The book of Proverbs remains the model of curriculum for humanity to learn how to live under God and before humankind. As a result, it beckons the church to diligent study and application.”<sup>6</sup> Proverbs is not a random, haphazard collection of wise sayings. It has structure and a plan. Various scholars have tried to organize Proverbs. This is not inspired but is the culmination of my study. Here is how I understand the construction of this Book (If you wonder why I share this, it is so you can personally and devotionally work your way through Proverbs in a way that is more helpful than reading a verse at a time):



<sup>5</sup> Koptak, P. E. (2003). *Proverbs* (p. 45). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>6</sup> Waltke, B. K. (2004). *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 1–15* (p. xxi). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

It will be helpful if you follow along as I explain this chart.

## **I – PROLOGUE AND EPILOGUE**

This collection of wise sayings is bookended by a prologue that encourages the pursuit of wisdom and the benefits of wisdom (Proverbs 1:1-7). The epilogue, written by Agur, shows us that our hearts are wicked and unable to receive wisdom and we need a special revelation (Proverbs 30).

## **II – A WORD FROM THE LADIES**

Just inside of the prologue and epilogue there are 2 sections that balance each other. Solomon on the one side records four poems by a lady. She is lady personified. *“She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her.”* (Proverbs 3:15, ESV). She is called Lady Wisdom. And then just before the Epilogue we hear from another lady, Lemuel’s mother, who gives her son good advice and what to look for in a wife. *“An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.”* (Proverbs 31:10, ESV).

## **III – TEN SPEECHES OF A FATHER TO A SON**

The next section is a father giving wise advice to a son. There are 10 sections that start “My son ...” This is the section that I will be focusing on in the next weeks.

## **IV – 100s OF PROVERBS**

The rest of the literature is filled with 100s of proverbs about character, finance, speech, etc. This section also includes a unique section called The Sayings of the Wise. Reading these proverbs can be helped a lot by people who have created topical lists. For example, is self-control the topic you want to address? This is from a topical list of Proverbs<sup>7</sup>:

- ☞ [Prov. 25:28] Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control.
- ☞ [29:11] Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end.

### Application

If you wanted to do a study of Proverbs or incorporate them in your devotions, I’d recommend this structure to you. For instance, consider the Prologue and then the Epilogue. Then focus on the poems of Lady Wisdom. I would suggest then considering the wisdom of Lemuel’s mother. Continue your study in the speeches of the Father and then by finding a topical index of proverbs go through the rest of the collection.

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<sup>7</sup> Smith, F. LaGard. The Daily Bible® - In Chronological Order (NIV®) . Harvest House Publishers. Kindle Edition.

## WHY?

Someone taught me a long time ago this truth: If you taught the Old Testament in a way that would bring great delight to a Rabbi, you do well. But if you apply the Old Testament in a way that brings his delight you fail. The reason we have a collection of Hebrew wisdom in Proverbs is because it is intended to lead us to Christ! Thus, the title of this series: Proverbs, the path to Wisdom.

Ultimate wisdom is not a saying in a book. Ultimate wisdom is a Person. Paul describes the world outside of Christ as a world that because of sin “became futile in their thinking”. “Their foolish hearts were darkened”. “They claimed to be wise but became fools.”<sup>8</sup> That is the person who neither acknowledges God, nor honors Him. That is the person who has no fear of God.

But God sent His Son. John called Him, the Word. *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”* (John 1:1,14, ESV) The Word is the mind of God personified. The Word is the wisdom of God in the flesh. The Apostle Paul tells us that all wisdom is found in Jesus Christ. *“. . . Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”* (Colossians 2:2–3, ESV).

If you are not a Christian, the Bible calls you to the certain reality there is one God, and you are not He. You are commanded by the Lord Jesus Christ to repent (Acts 17:30) and bow in humble submission to Him. You must recognize that only He knows what is right and what is wrong. By trusting in the fact that His Son came to live a perfect life of wisdom (a life you and I could never live) and died a death that is defined by the Bible as the “wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18ff). The Cross, which is foolishness to so many people, is the wisdom of God, sufficient to pay the debt of all your foolishness. Those that trust in Him will experience the reality that He will become wisdom to you. Listen to how Paul encourages Christians: *“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).

One of the many blessings of being “in Christ” is to be in an eternal, indissoluble relationship with one who is the wisdom of God. And this can be yours through faith – through trusting completely in Jesus Christ, the Lord. Solomon’s Proverbs remind us throughout that this wisdom can only come to those who are born of the Spirit, in relationship with Jesus.

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<sup>8</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ro 1:21–23). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.