

# Lesson 2: Structure and Form: How Proverbs Teaches



Last week, we laid the foundation for this seminar by talking about biblical wisdom literature as a whole, about Proverbs in particular, about the fear of the LORD as the beginning of wisdom, and about Christ as the fullness of wisdom. One of the points that came up, and that I want to emphasize again this morning, is how deeply covenantal the entire Bible is.

Micah told me after last week's class, "You used the word 'covenant' more in that lesson than I've heard anyone use it in 10 years!" I take that as a compliment. I intend to lean into it. The Bible is covenantal not just in its promises, but in its entire shape and structure.

Think about it. In the Old Testament, we see:

- The Covenant of Works in the Garden
- The Noahic Covenant
- The TWO Abrahamic Covenants (Genesis 15 and Genesis 17)
- The Mosaic Covenant (given through Moses, renewed by Joshua and later by Ezra/Nehemiah)
- The Davidic Covenant (given to David and renewed with Solomon)
- All of this leads us forward to the New Covenant in Christ's blood.

Further, in the very arrangement of Scripture, we see covenantal shape. Here is a graphic I have adapted from Miles Van Pelt's book on the Old Testament<sup>1</sup>:

	Covenant	Covenant History		Covenant Life		
Covenant Prologue	Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Joshua Judges Samuel Kings	Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel The Twelve	Psalms Job Proverbs Ruth Song of Songs Ecclesiastes	Lamentations Esther Daniel Ezra Nehemiah Chronicles	Covenant Epilogue
Genesis	Matthew Mark Luke John	Acts		Paul's Epistles James Peter's Epistles John's Epistles	Jude	Revelation

He has argued (I believe correctly) that:

## Old Testament

- Genesis functions as the covenant prologue
- Exodus through Deuteronomy as the covenant itself, including the life and ministry of the covenant mediator, Moses
- The Prophets as covenant history, including the history of Israel from entering the Promised Land under Joshua, through the Conquest, Judges, United/Divided Monarchy, then leaving the land with exile to Assyria and Babylon
- The Writings as covenant life or "How does Israel live before her God?"

## New Testament

- The Gospels as the covenant, including the life and ministry of the covenant mediator, Jesus Christ
- Acts as covenant history, including the sending of Israel out into the world
- The Epistles as covenant life or "How does New Israel live before her God?"
- Revelation as covenant epilogue

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Miles Van Pelt, "Introduction," in A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 33.

So the question Proverbs presses upon us is this: How do we live in light of the covenant? Wisdom is not about speculation, but about covenantal living. It's about how to walk rightly with God and neighbor because of who God is (covenant Lord) and what He has promised in Christ (covenant mediator).

That's why it's important to remember that Proverbs is wisdom literature. It is not law. It is not historical narrative. It is not prophecy. It is not a didactic epistle. It speaks in a different register. If we misread it, if we turn Proverbs into a new law code, we miss the point entirely.

Instead, Proverbs invites us to see these sayings as covenantal instruction: fatherly counsel teaching us how to live wisely, fearing the LORD, walking humbly before Him, and finding our hope not in our works but in the works of Christ who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Corinthians 1:30).

## Example of Abusing Proverbs

Here's a video I saw recently of a pastor calling in to Dave Ramsey's radio talk show:

**Pastor:** I often hear you use the phrase "the borrower is slave to the lender." And I definitely agree with that principle in many ways. But then on the other end, I noticed that when it comes to a mortgage, you are okay borrowing in that instance, which seems almost to betray that principle a little bit. And I guess I was just curious on your reasoning as to why you think it's okay to borrow in that instance.

**Dave:** Pastor, that is a wonderful question. And of course, you're quoting the scriptures. Proverbs 22:7, "the rich rules over the poor and the borrower is slave to the lender." And this is a biblical principle that we're violating when we say it's okay to take out a mortgage. And that's your point and you're correct completely on that. It is the only hypocritical advice we give on this show. It's the only thing we tell people it's okay to do that I never do. I went broke in my 20s as I was a baby Christian. I had just met God and I discovered in that process a guy teaching what the Bible said about money named Larry Burkett and I said, "I'm going to follow what the Bible says. I'm never borrowing money again." And I've never borrowed money again. I don't borrow money for anything, ever, for any reason, under any circumstances. Everything else I tell people on the show to do, I do exactly what I say to do. Allowing people to take out a mortgage without me yelling at them, it's the only time that my advice is inconsistent with my life. Does that make sense? Right. Completely completely fair for you to call me out on it. And then I'll answer your question, but I wanted to caveat that and say I don't borrow money for anything. And sometimes when I get a question where it's kind of borderline whether they have to borrow or not, I tell them that story. I say, "Hey, I don't borrow for anything." And I recommend that. That is the best way. If you follow biblical principles in your marriage, your marriage is going to prosper. If you follow biblical principles raising your kids, your kids are going to be amazing. And the same's true in your money and in your leadership. If you're running a church, running a business, same thing's true. And I believe if the Bible says it and you do it, it's a good thing, right? {call continues from there}

Let's break down the if-then laws that Dave is setting up:

IF you follow biblical principles,

THEN you get blessing (prosperous marriage, amazing kids, healthy church, successful business, etc.).

What's the problem here? This is the Prosperity Gospel. Pushed to its logical extremes (which I don't believe Dave does in practice), this is a heretical parody of the Gospel. Why? Because it misreads the Scriptures and takes principles and turns them into promise, forgetting godly suffering!

This is exactly what we cannot and must not do when reading the book of Proverbs. We must understand what kind of literature we're dealing with and interpret it accordingly. Again, these are not laws or promises, but principles of godly living ... as a child of the covenant. They are not simply "principles of godly living" or "good advice" or generic teaching within a vacuum. No, they're specifically covenantally oriented. If we miss that, we'll miss the heart of Proverbs.

So, how does this work?

# The “My Son” Speeches (Proverbs 1-9)

The opening nine chapters of Proverbs are unique in both style and substance. Instead of the short, pithy sayings we normally associate with the book, these chapters present extended discourses: the “My son” speeches. Repeatedly, the fatherly voice calls, “*My son, hear your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching*” (**Proverbs 1:8**). These addresses set the covenantal stage for the entire book. Before we ever arrive at the individual proverbs, we are first invited into the covenant household, where wisdom is transmitted from one generation to the next.

This is no accident of literary style. It reflects God’s covenantal design for His people. From **Deuteronomy 6** onward, parents are charged with diligently teaching God’s words to their children “*when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.*” (**Deuteronomy 6:7b**).

**Proverbs 1-9** puts flesh on that command, showing us what covenantal instruction actually looks like: a father, in love, urging his son to walk in the fear of the LORD, warning him against sinners, and pointing him toward the blessings of wisdom.

These speeches are also deeply theological. They remind us that wisdom is not first a matter of cleverness or experience but of covenantal faithfulness. The repeated refrain is that “*the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge*” (**Proverbs 1:7; 9:10**). The father calls his son to treasure wisdom as if seeking hidden treasure (**Proverbs 2:4**), to guard his heart from the adulteress (**Proverbs 7:5**), and to cling to wisdom as to life itself (**Proverbs 4:13**). The “My son” addresses frame the pursuit of wisdom not as an elective interest but as the very path of life and death.

Theologically, then, **Proverbs 1-9** shows us that wisdom is covenantal inheritance. To reject a father’s instruction is not simply to reject family counsel; it is to despise the covenant God has made with His people. Conversely, to heed instruction is to embrace covenant faithfulness. Thus, the opening section of Proverbs situates wisdom in the covenant home and in the covenant community, reminding us that the stakes are eternal.

Finally, the “My son” speeches prepare us for the rest of the book by training our ears. They attune us to hear the proverbs not as abstract principles but as covenantal instruction. Just as Israel was called to hear and obey the voice of the LORD at Sinai, so the son is called to hear and obey the voice of wisdom in Proverbs. In this way, **Proverbs 1-9** lays down the covenantal pattern:

**God’s people are to hear, to heed, and to walk in the fear of the LORD.**

## **The “My son” Addresses in Proverbs 1-9**

- **1:8-19**: “*Hear, my son, your father’s instruction...*” (warning against sinful companions)
- **2:1-22**: “*My son, if you receive my words...*” (the pursuit and rewards of wisdom)
- **3:1-12**: “*My son, do not forget my teaching...*” (trust in the LORD, not self)
- **3:21-35**: “*My son, do not lose sight of these...*” (keeping sound wisdom and discretion)
- **4:1-9**: “*Hear, O sons, a father’s instruction...*” (get wisdom at all costs)
- **4:10-19**: “*Hear, my son, and accept my words...*” (two paths: wisdom vs. wickedness)
- **4:20-27**: “*My son, be attentive to my words...*” (guarding the heart and walk)
- **5:1-23**: “*My son, be attentive to my wisdom...*” (warning against *the forbidden woman*)
- **6:1-19**: “*My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor...*” (various warnings)
- **6:20-35**: “*My son, keep your father’s commandment...*” (another warning against *adultery*)
- **7:1-27**: “*My son, keep my words...*” (extended warning against *the adulteress*)
- **8:1-36**: “*Does not wisdom call? Does not understanding raise her voice?*”
  - Not phrased as a “My son” address, but it functions as climactic instruction
- **9:1-18**: Wisdom’s house vs. Folly’s house (the conclusion to the opening section).

This structure makes clear that **Proverbs 1-9** is not a random collection, but a carefully ordered series of appeals leading the son (and the reader) to a decision: will you walk in wisdom or in folly?

**Note the repeated theme of sexual sin and think of the damage it caused to the author.**

# Parallelism and Poetic Form

Having seen the covenantal frame of the book in **Proverbs 1-9**, we now turn to the main body of the book (**Proverbs 10-31**), where the style shifts dramatically. Instead of extended father-to-son addresses, we encounter short, two-line sayings, the proverbial form we most often associate with the book. At the heart of these sayings is parallelism, a defining feature of Hebrew poetry.

Unlike English poetry, which often relies on rhyme or meter, Hebrew poetry builds meaning by placing lines side by side. These lines are not random; they relate to each other in specific ways. The parallel form compresses truth into memorable, portable units designed for meditation and application. The form itself teaches us how to read: slowly, reflectively, covenantally. These are not lines to (simply) memorize, but to ingest.

Scholars usually describe three main types of parallelism:

1. **Synonymous parallelism:** the second line restates the idea of the first, often with slight variation or intensification.
  - *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction."* (**Proverbs 1:7**)
  - Here's the structure:
    - The first clause presents the positive truth
    - The second restates the same truth negatively, reinforcing it
2. **Antithetic parallelism:** the second line contrasts with the first, highlighting a choice or opposition. This is the most common type in Proverbs.
  - *"A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother."* (**Proverbs 10:1**)
  - The stark contrast drives the lesson home:
    - Wisdom brings covenant blessing
    - Folly brings grief
3. **Synthetic (or formal) parallelism:** the second line develops, completes, or explains the first.
  1. *"Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce."* (**Proverbs 3:9**)
  2. The second line specifies what the first line means in practice.

Antithetic comes from the Greek word *antithesis*, meaning "opposition" or "contrast." In literature, it refers to the setting of one idea against another. In Proverbs, it describes parallel lines that are in deliberate tension (e.g., wise vs. foolish).

Synthetic comes from the Greek word *synthesis*, meaning "putting together" or "combination." In literature, it refers to building or developing an idea by adding to it. In Proverbs, the second line doesn't contrast but expands or completes the first thought.

By shaping wisdom in parallel lines, Proverbs teaches us that truth is best grasped in tension, comparison, and contrast. This poetic form is itself part of the covenantal pedagogy: it forces us to pause, to weigh two paths, and to see the consequences of wisdom versus folly. Revelation uses symbolism to represent reality in a way that provides a 3-dimensional view across time and different circumstances. This allows for a fuller representation of the truth than straightforward, didactic teaching can provide. In a similar way, Proverbs provides contrasts and general statements to frame life as a series of choices between covenantal faithfulness or unfaithfulness in a way that causes us to think deeply and be able to apply its lessons across a wider variety of circumstances than a single, short book can cover.

The parallelism also guards us against misreading Proverbs as absolute promises or rigid laws. These sayings are poetic generalizations meant to guide covenantal living, not ironclad formulas. To treat them otherwise, as if they function like legal codes or contractual guarantees, is to flatten their poetic power and to misuse them. Instead, we must read Proverbs as wisdom poetry: compact, rhythmic, memorable, and aimed at shaping our hearts in the fear of the LORD.



# The Personification of Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly

One of the most striking literary features in **Proverbs 1-9** is the way Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly are presented as if they were people, specifically, as women calling out in public places. Lady Wisdom cries aloud in the streets (**Proverbs 1:20-33**), builds her house and spreads her feast (**Proverbs 9:1-6**), while Dame Folly sits at her door, loud and seductive, inviting the naïve to destruction (**Proverbs 9:13-18**). This is not historical narrative but poetic personification. By giving voice and character to abstract realities, the book of Proverbs dramatizes the choice every covenant member must face.

This technique also fits with the family setting of Proverbs. If the “My son” speeches ground wisdom in the covenant household, the personifications of Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly cast wisdom itself in relational terms. Lady Wisdom is portrayed as a faithful woman whose words lead to life and blessing. Dame Folly, by contrast, is portrayed as an adulteress or prostitute, luring the unsuspecting into sin and ultimately into Sheol. The imagery underscores the stakes: choosing wisdom is like embracing covenant faithfulness, while choosing folly is like committing covenant adultery.

Theologically, it is tempting to equate Lady Wisdom one-to-one with Christ, since Paul tells us that Christ has become to us “*wisdom from God*” (**1 Corinthians 1:30**). And indeed, in a typological sense, Lady Wisdom *points us forward* to Christ (typology), the incarnate Word, the one “*greater than Solomon*” (**Matthew 12:42**). But Proverbs itself is careful to use Lady Wisdom as *a poetic device*, *not* as *a literal figure*. We should therefore avoid collapsing her into a direct Christological identity. Instead, the personification of Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly sets up another contrast:

- Lady Wisdom *symbolizes*:
  - The voice of covenant faithfulness
  - The call of *God’s Word applied to daily life*.
- Dame Folly *symbolizes*:
  - Covenant unfaithfulness
  - The seductive pull of *sin and idolatry* that *leads to death*.

As I put it last week:

- In Proverbs, wisdom is *personified*.
- In Christ, wisdom is *incarnated*.

For the covenant people of God, this personification makes the choice unavoidable.

- Wisdom is not *simply* an abstract concept.
  - She is a voice crying out, summoning us to hear, to heed, and to live.
- Folly is not *simply* “bad decisions”.
  - She is an ever-present temptation, promising sweetness but delivering death.

Every day, God’s people are confronted with the call:

## *Whose voice will you heed, Lady Wisdom or Dame Folly?*

Ultimately, Christ Himself *fulfills* the role of Lady Wisdom, not as a mere poetic personification, but as the eternal Son of God who became incarnate, who taught with the authority of one “*greater than Solomon*”, and who now calls us through His Spirit to forsake folly and walk in newness of life.

Wisdom says:

*[34] Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors.*

*[35] For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD, (Proverbs 8:34–35, ESV)*

Christ says:

*[28] Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. [29] Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. [30] For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28–30, ESV)*