

## PROVERBS

For the new year that's ahead of us, we can probably anticipate even more disruption and turmoil than last year as well as continuing spread of the coronavirus and more virus deaths. So we are going to need God's wisdom to get through it in a way that pleases God. Therefore we right now need to study the Book of Proverbs and prepare our minds for how we respond to coming events. That's because what Proverbs is all about is skillful and wise living in a confusing world, in a world saturated with evil and foolishness. Proverbs is God telling us what's wise and good in the nitty-gritty of life in this chaotic, turbulent world.

Some words about the Book may be helpful. There are about 800 proverbs in the book, dealing with a huge spectrum of practical issues. Most were written by Solomon, who had the unique spiritual gift of being the wisest king Israel (or any nation) had, so he was quite capable of knowing what's wise for us even today. Some proverbs were written by Agur and by King Lemuel. No one knows who those dudes were and it doesn't matter, because it's likely that Solomon collected their sayings and added them to his own. The structural organization of the Book of Proverbs is irrelevant to us.

One thing we miss in reading the proverbs in English is that they were originally written in Hebrew in poetic form. In the Hebrew text, the proverbs consist of very, very few words, and the words were carefully chosen to be memorable. Most proverbs are two-liners, where the second line expands, contrasts, emphasizes or completes the thought of the first line. In Bible exposition, this is called parallelism. We are reading literature here that's of the highest order of greatness.

Proverbs doesn't replace the Mosaic Law. It illustrates it. Proverbs may come across on superficial reading as lots of good advice, or as a collection of interesting observations about life. But that totally misses the purpose of Proverbs. We need to study them in order to train our mind to be attuned to the moral dimension of situations that arise in the course of life. The purpose of Proverbs is to teach us how to think morally. As we study these proverbs, our brain will form the neural pathways necessary to be able to grasp the moral essence of a situation, so that we can respond in a godly manner. In the first few verses of the Book, the word "discipline" appears twice. That's because careful study of this book of wisdom, reflecting on its examples of wise and right behavior, trains us to be morally discerning people, able to recognize and eschew ungodliness. In every area of life, there are choices to be made; so we need the training of Proverbs to avoid folly and instead practice righteousness when the situation, whatever it may be, presents itself.

Too many of us have the bizarre idea that we just live our lives according to how others do, or according to how we think life should be lived. Proverbs says that life must be lived skillfully, wisely, according to how God wants it lived. Because if not, we suffer consequences. And Proverbs is there to help us develop that skill. Proverbs wants us to have godly character, not the character of a fool.

We dwell in a necessarily moral universe because God is holy. So we need to live holy. We *must* live holy lives. God demands it. Wisdom is intimately related to God, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (9:10). The repeated references in the book to "the fear of the Lord" means how we live, how we respond to circumstances, is loaded with consequences. God holds us accountable for whether we choose the right or the wrong response.

Proverbs says, essentially, that there are only two ways to live, wisely or foolishly. We should choose in every situation we encounter, not only those touched on in this book but those we experience in everyday life today, to go in the way that's wise. Wisdom is to live in obedience to the Lord. **"For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding"** (2:6), and **"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding..."** (3:5). Notice: "from His mouth" means *God* tells us what's right and what's wrong. Because of our inherent sin nature, we're incapable of figuring it out on our own. We'll *always* choose the wrong! We're to be self-disciplined, obedient, God-fearing people. And as we live godly lives, God draws us closer and closer to Himself.

We too easily misunderstand the Book of Proverbs. We're so aware of the doctrine of Scripture as being God's inerrant truth that we suppose that all the proverbs, because they're in the Bible, must also be invariably true. As if they were promises or guarantees from God. Not so! Many of them are simply generalizations about life as Solomon observed human behavior. Their deliberately pithy nature means that the exceptions that could occur don't get mentioned. We need to know basics before learning exceptions. Proverbs correctly first teaches us the basics of life, although some of the proverbs do deal with exceptions. These proverbs Solomon wrote, although brilliantly crafted and derived from observation, are inspired Scripture, ie, the Spirit of God so superintended these writings that they are God's Word.

In my Bible, I have flagged about 130 of the proverbs for continued reflection. Let's look at just a few of those proverbs to see how they instruct us. We'll continue this survey in coming weeks.

**"For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding"** (2:6) means that God is the ultimate (and sole) source of wisdom. Wisdom is a gift from God. As there are only 2 options for us, foolishness or wisdom, and the consequences of being foolish are deadly, we need to know God's Word *thoroughly* – and do what it says. This is major. The Bible isn't a take it or leave it book. If we don't know it as well as we should, we need to get at it. If we fear the Lord, for He's a judge who's a consuming fire, we'll take His Word seriously. As seriously as life itself.

**"Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act"** (3:27). Perhaps the idea here is, don't withhold wages from a hired worker. But there's more. Righteousness is helping those who are in need, to the extent that we're able. We live in community, we're social creatures. God made us that way. "Am I my brother's keeper?" gets a Yes for an answer. God didn't withhold good from us when He gave His life on the cross for our sins, although we certainly do not deserve it. So we're to be like God, others-oriented regardless what it costs us. Indifference to the needs of others is folly. A self-absorbed life is folly.

**"But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble."** In view of this proverb, 4:19, we ought to abandon all interest and concern over our nation's economy, politics, and culture, because it's all darkness. We are people of the light. So we should occupy our minds with God and what He's doing, and what His will is for us. This is radical, sure. It's not just a matter of priorities, it's a matter of which sphere we want to live in: that of the pagans, who know only darkness and ignorance, or that of Christ.

**"A gold ring in the snout of a pig . . . a woman both lovely and witless"** (11:22). In this proverb, the parallelism involves a metaphor. Metaphors are to make us reflect on what it is that's similar. A beautiful woman here is likened to a pig, her beauty is just the gold ring. This highly memorable proverb makes us reflect on the vanity of beauty. The pig is still just a pig, gold ring notwithstanding. We focus on the wrong things in life. Character is vastly more important than outward appearance. And Solomon is correct, by the way. Most gorgeous Hollywood actresses are, in fact, total airheads.

**"A fool shows his annoyance at once; but a prudent man overlooks an insult"** (12:16). This proverb shows up the "woke" people of America. They're fools. They take offense at anything that comes their way that doesn't jibe exactly with their own views, showing intolerance and hatred. A godly person, in contrast, has a heart of compassion and forgiveness. The "woke" people think they're on the side of justice, but this proverb means they absolutely cannot be.

**"He whose walk is upright fears the Lord, but he whose ways are devious despises Him"** (14:2). There's a connection between living a righteous life and the fear of God. The one who knows God, fears Him because of His awesomeness, and so does His will is "upright." Those however who are anti-theists, pagans, secular people, cannot please God regardless what they do, for their ways are "devious." They may do good things, show kindness, be humble, etc. but if the fear of God isn't there, they aren't upright.

**"Like snow in summer or rain in harvest, honor is not fitting for a fool."** This, 26:1, is another proverb with metaphors that make us think what it is that's similar in the two lines. How is snow in summer or rain at harvest time like a fool having honor? Well, it doesn't snow in the summer, that's absurd, it doesn't happen. And it doesn't rain at harvest time (in Israel, that is). And likewise fools don't and can't have good character. In this pithy and memorable way, the proverb teaches how exceedingly important our moral character is to God. But proverbs are deep. They're here to provoke us to think about God, and about exceptions. So, for example, What if a person of good, wise character does something foolish? Solomon himself did that. Well, the proverb doesn't go into that. But we can in our thoughts. We all, at some time or another, say or do something foolish. What does that say about our character? We're all flawed. Is *anyone* perfect? Yes, Jesus. That's why we all need to be in Christ for salvation. The proverbs thus bring us to Christ.

**"A rich man may be wise in his own eyes, but a poor man who has discernment sees thru him"** (28:11). In Hebrew, the first line consists of 4 words, the second line has only 3. It takes 18 words however to bring the thought into English. Solomon was uniquely both wise and wealthy. But he observes here that, in general, riches steals wisdom away from wealthy people. We suppose that wealthy people must be intelligent and careful thinkers, and that poor people must be morally obtuse. Wrong! Poor people aren't necessarily ignorant. They're able to discern what's moral or godly better than conceited rich people can. Things are not always as they might seem. This proverb is here to make us reflect on what the reasons are for this ironic reversal. And . . . it should cause us to not covet wealth.