



The Book of Proverbs
SOLOMON: WISDOM & WANDER
Week 42 – The Book of Proverbs

Introduction

The book of Proverbs is part of the “Wisdom” tradition in the Old Testament. The Wisdom literature collection consists of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job. It was during the lifetime of Solomon (and due to his unique God-given gift of wisdom) that Israel’s Wisdom tradition reached its peak. Solomon wrote “three thousand proverbs” (1Kings 4:32), some of which were included in the book of Proverbs. Yet, both before and after Solomon, wise men and wise sayings were parts of Israel’s culture. Wise men served in King David’s court (1 Chronicles 27:32,33), and the wise woman of Tekoa made a visit to David (2 Samuel 14). Even outside of Israel, wisdom and wise men were popular: in Egypt (1 Kings 4:30), Edom and Arabia (Jeremiah 49:7) and Babylon (Isaiah 47:10). An Egyptian collection of wise sayings have been discovered dating back to 2,450 B.C. even before Abraham, the father of Israel was alive. **Israel’s Wisdom literature is set apart from the rest by the fact that the fear of the Lord (Yahweh) is the foundation for all true wisdom concerning the issues of life.**

The Organization of Proverbs

The book of Proverbs contains two major sections.

The first section (chs.1-9) is an extended discussion of the value of wisdom and the importance of seeking it. This discussion takes the form of *“a series of fatherly talks that press home to the pupil (son) the fateful choice he must make between wisdom and folly”* (Derek Kidner).

The second section (chs.10-31) contains the actual proverbs of wisdom from various sources: Solomon (chs.10-22 & 25-29), wise men (chs.22:17-24:34), Agur (ch.30), King Lemuel (ch.31). An A-Z collection of proverbs describing the wise/excellent wife concludes the book (31:10-31).

The Purpose of Proverbs

At the very outset, the writer announces the purpose of the book:

“The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight; for receiving instruction in prudent behavior, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young - let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance - for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise” (1:1-6).

Summarizing, we see these four purposes of the book of Proverbs:

- **To train** the young, the naïve or the inexperienced person in wisdom to succeed in life (1:4; 4:13).
- **To encourage** the wise and discerning person to gain more wisdom, guidance and understanding (1:5,6).
- **To warn** those who are foolish and mock wisdom to turn back and avoid a variety of costly consequences (1:22,23).
- **To teach** ALL who desire to grow in wisdom, that in their pursuit they will understand more of GOD and His ways, and learn to reverence and 'fear' Him (1:7; 2:1-6).

What is Wisdom?

In the opening lines (and throughout the book) the writer uses synonyms to help us understand what wisdom is:

- **Instruction (training/discipline).** Wisdom is training in the art of life. It involves intentional teaching, and discipline - with warnings, strict coaching, correcting with love, requiring learning and skills - to encourage a wise life (12:1; 15:32; 24:30-32).

“To learn, you must love discipline; it is stupid to hate correction” (12:1).

- **Understanding (discernment).** Wisdom is insight into the issues of life. Gaining insight from God's perspective; learning to discern between good and evil. *“Don't befriend angry people or associate with hot-tempered people, or you will learn to be like them and endanger your soul” (22:24,25).*

- **Wise behavior.** Wisdom is common sense in how to live life. It is being life-smart; learning how life works, how to navigate it; how to take advantage of the opportunities that life offers.

“A wise youth harvests in the summer, but one who sleeps during harvest is a disgrace” (10:5).

- **Prudence (discretion).** Wisdom is good judgment that leads to success. It is living with eyes wide open; learning to look beyond the moment and anticipate what could happen depending on what choice is made - either with words or actions.

“A prudent person foresees danger and takes precautions. The simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences” (22:3).

- **Knowledge (learning).** Wisdom is intellectual skill in grasping truth. Choosing to learn from wise people concerning God and His Word - which is true and reliable - to have confidence in how to speak, make choices and live wisely.

“Listen to the words of the wise; apply your heart to my instruction. For it is good to keep these sayings in your heart and always ready on your lips. I am teaching you today - yes, you - so you will trust in the Lord. I have written thirty sayings for you, filled with advice and knowledge. In this way, you may know the truth and take an accurate report to those who sent you” (22:17-21).

How do I become wise?

There are 3 steps in the process of gaining wisdom. The first step is repeated at the beginning and end of the opening father-son dialogue:

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (1:7).

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (9:10).

To “fear” the Lord is to personally believe in and become rooted in the GOD OF WISDOM. His Word is His revealed wisdom and choosing to live in His World, following His revealed wisdom is “to fear the Lord.”

Therefore, I must:

- > Realize who God is.
- > Revere what He says.
- > Submit to His voice.

Secondly, I must cultivate an appetite for godly wisdom. The more I 'taste' and 'apply' His wisdom, the more I will 'hunger' for it. The Lord will delight in giving it to me.

“If you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding” (2:3-6).

Wisdom will be given to *“the humble eager person – the ‘suitor’ (lover) – that watches daily at the gates to meet her”* (Kidner).

Third, I must be teachable in all areas of learning new skills. There are people all around me who have knowledge and skills that I don't have. I should seek them out and invite their teaching.

Where do I learn Wisdom?

*“Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm”
(Proverbs 13:20).*

- We glean wisdom from people who already have it (parents, elders, teachers, coaches, mentors, etc. 4:1,10,20; 5:1; 6:20). I will learn wisdom by being in community with wise and skilled people.

- We learn wisdom from the consequences (discipline), that result from poor choices (3:11,12; 6:23).

What are the benefits of Wisdom?

- Wisdom will adorn my life with dignity and a good reputation.

*“Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching. They are a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck”
(1:8,9; also 3:4).*

“You will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man” (3:4).

- Wisdom rescues me from the negative consequences of a life of folly.

“Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you. Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men, from men whose words are perverse, who have left the straight paths to walk in dark ways” (2:11-13; also 1:10-19).

- Wisdom also offers: length of days, peace, happiness, security, restful sleep, and confidence (3:2,4,5-6;13-26; 4:8,9; 8:32-36).

“If you become wise, you will be the one to benefit. If you scorn wisdom, you will be the one to suffer” (9:12).

- Wisdom is beyond monetary value. Living a life of wisdom is better than living a life of success and fame.

*“For wisdom is more profitable than silver, and her wages are better than gold. Wisdom is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her”
(3:14,15; also 8:19).*

Some of the “richest” people on earth are those who possess very little earthly wealth, yet they possess vast amounts of godly wisdom. For example, John the Baptist lived a wise and righteous life. Even though his life was short, and seemingly obscure, Jesus said that no one on earth compared to the greatness of John. John was distinguished by his wisdom.

On the other hand, King Herod, who killed John, was an extremely wealthy and powerful man. Yet, he lacked wisdom and lived a life of folly. Herod was the one person to whom Jesus would not speak a word. *“Do not answer a fool according to his folly” (Proverbs 26:4).*

Wisdom is personified as a Lady in two different ways. Wisdom is not a person; rather, it is the body of principles and laws established by God to give order to the universe. There are **natural laws** that govern how the material world works (eg. *“What goes up must come down”*), and there are **moral laws** that govern how life works (eg. *“Pride comes before the fall”*).

To use other terms, we might say that Wisdom is both the ‘science’ and the ‘conscience’ of the universe. In Proverbs chapter 8, Wisdom is personified as a Lady in these two different ways.

1. Lady Wisdom calls out as a moral teacher (8:1-21).

In the first personification of Wisdom, she appears as a lady standing at the gate leading into the city, calling out to those who are entering to listen to her teaching and thereby gain wisdom as to how to live successfully in the city (i.e., in ‘the world’).

“Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice? At the highest point along the way, where the paths meet, she takes her stand; beside the gate leading into the city, at the entrance, she cries aloud: ‘To you, O people, I call out; I raise my voice to all mankind. You who are simple, gain prudence; you who are foolish, set your hearts on it. Listen, for I have trustworthy things to say; I open my lips to speak what is right. My mouth speaks what is true, for my lips detest wickedness. All the words of my mouth are just; none of them is crooked or perverse. To the discerning all of them are right; they are upright to those who have found knowledge. Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her” (8:1-11).

Think of the role of a tour guide, as you prepare to explore a new city. The guide gives you the information necessary in order to have a successful trip in that city. They might steer you toward certain sites and locations, as well as steering you away from other locations that are either unfruitful or even dangerous. The goal of the tour guide is to make your journey a huge success. In much the same way, Lady Wisdom offers advice to people entering “the city” (i.e., life, or the world) so that their journey will be a win.

If we accept her guidance, she

- 1) schools and trains us,
- 2) becomes a friend and counselor to us, and
- 3) later praises and blesses us.

As her students, who learn of her ways, we are the only ones whom she will help when we are being tested. If we choose to go our own path, and don't follow her wisdom, we will be left to our own fate when we are tested.

2. Lady Wisdom stood by God as a master architect (8:22-31).

In the second personification of Wisdom, she appears as God's assistant in the work of designing and fashioning the entire universe. Her skill is reflected in every aspect of God's creation.

“I was there when he established the heavens, when he drew the horizon on the oceans. I was there when he set the clouds above, when he established springs deep in the earth. I was there when he set the limits of the seas, so they would not spread beyond their boundaries. And when he marked off the earth's foundations, I was the architect at his side. I was his constant delight, rejoicing always in his presence” (8:27-30).

When we stand and marvel at some aspect of the universe, we are seeing the fruit of Lady Wisdom. She was the “blueprint,” the set of “ordering principles” that God used to fashion our world.

3. Lady Wisdom's final appeal.

After the two personifications have been presented, Lady Wisdom lifts her voice and calls out to all who would follow her and find life:

“And so, my children, listen to me, for all who follow my ways are joyful. Listen to my instruction and be wise. Don't ignore it. Joyful are those who listen to me, watching for me daily at my gates, waiting for me outside my home! For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the Lord. But those who miss me injure themselves. All who hate me love death” (8:32-36).

The choice is clear. Choose wisdom = life. Choose folly = death.

“Women and Wisdom share femininity itself. By learning Lady Wisdom's principles and emulating her roles and relationships, we (women) will find a powerful and mature aspect of our femininity.”

“Ideally, Wisdom relates to humans in a mother-to-wife progression. Wisdom first approaches a child (when he is young and foolish) as a mother or strict school teacher. If he obeys and listens to her, he becomes an adolescent with whom deeper communication and friendship are possible. During this time Wisdom acts as a teacher and patron, showering her student with knowledge and benefits. At maturity, the boy becomes a man, and Wisdom becomes his helper and intimate lover. She responds to him with her counsel and exalts him as he rules his domain maturely. As she has been moving from mother to wife, he has been growing from fool to king.” (Barbara Mouser, Five Aspects of Woman).

Note: Jesus is our wisdom; but Jesus is not “Lady Wisdom.”

The New Testament clearly teaches that Jesus Christ is our wisdom.

“Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1Cor.1:24).

“It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God” (1Cor. 1:30).

“My purpose is...that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2: 2b-3).

Jesus Christ is a person – the 2nd person of the triune godhead. Lady Wisdom the set of principles (both natural and moral) that God used to bring order to our world.

A Final Thought about EVE and WISDOM

It is instructive to ponder the relationship between Eve and Wisdom, for it was the specific temptation to find wisdom apart from God that caused Eve to fall. God had been imparting wisdom and knowledge of Himself to both Adam and Eve.

The tempter – Satan – came to Eve disguised as a serpent. He is later referred to as *“the great dragon, the ancient serpent . . . the one deceiving the whole world”* (Revelation 12:9).

He tempted Eve to doubt God’s word and to search for wisdom apart from Him.

“For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it” (Genesis 3:5,6).

Thus, the “original sin” was the sin of trying to find wisdom apart from a relationship with God. This desire for wisdom led Eve to disobey God’s word and His loving boundaries – to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Simply knowing God’s wisdom and commands (in our heads) does NOT guarantee that we will walk in this wisdom. We often choose to follow our own desires and senses. Today, so many voices of intellectual and accomplished people call out to us to come and taste of their wisdom.

The only way to discern whether the wisdom being offered is truly good (and worthy of my trust) is to have settled the issue that God’s wisdom is the true and right path. I must be a continual student of Lady Wisdom through my entire life . . . and this means spending much time in God’s Word.