

Proverbs

by Ross Callaghan

<http://rosscallaghan.yolasite.com>



Proverbs may have been an early ‘textbook’ written to help young people gain wisdom so they can succeed in life. It teaches us that true wisdom comes from having a right relationship with God.

Authors The main author is Solomon, but other sections were written by “the wise” (22:17-24:34), Agur (30:1-33) and Lemuel (31:1-9).

Type Wisdom literature. This type of literature uses stories and writings to teach about God and provide wisdom for life. Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon are other Old Testament books classified as wisdom literature.

An important principle to recognize when reading Proverbs is that the proverbs are wise sayings written to help readers *attain wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, and knowledge and discretion to the young.* 1:2-4. They were written by wise men more than 3000 years ago. As such, they represent the wisdom and understanding of their writers, and the prevailing culture of the time. They should not necessarily be seen as the words of God!

Most of the proverbs are broad generalisations about life as it was long ago. This means we can’t take isolated verses from the book of Proverbs and say “This is the Word of God”. What we can do, though, is glean from the proverbs much wisdom that is still relevant today.

Date The book of Proverbs was compiled some time before 700BC, possibly *by the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah.* (25:1). Solomon had ruled around 970–930BC and they would have had access to his writings.

Theme Proverbs teaches us that *knowledge of God and the fear of the Lord* lead to wisdom that will help us in our everyday life. This will have great benefits in our personal lives, our families, our jobs and our communities. God’s blessings come on those who love Him and walk in His ways, but Proverbs shows us that this doesn’t mean that life will always be wonderful. The ‘wicked’ and the ‘righteous’ both experience their share of life’s tribulations, but God’s ways are always the best ways for us to live.

Key verses

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. 1:7

The Lord gives wisdom and from His mouth come knowledge and understanding. 2:6.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him and He will make your paths straight. 2:5,6.

Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost you all you have, get understanding. 4:7.

Many are the plans in a human heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails. 19:21.

Outline

The Proverbs of Solomon (Proverbs 1:1- 22:16)

Introduction 1:1-7

In the first 7 verses Solomon sets out the purpose of Proverbs. The book was written so we can *attain wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, and knowledge and discretion to the young.* 1:2-4. This will be communicated through *proverbs, parables and sayings and riddles of the wise.*

Even though he had many shortcomings in his personal life, Solomon was well qualified to write about wisdom. He was the wisest man in the East because he got his wisdom as a special gift from God. See 1 Kings 3:1-28; 4:30. The Hebrew word Solomon uses here for “wisdom” is *hokmah*. It occurs 37 times throughout Proverbs and describes a special ability to make choices and use knowledge. Solomon shows us that the starting point for true wisdom is God: *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.* Wisdom always has an unchanging reference point: God Himself.

Lessons about wisdom. 1:8–9:18

This section contains 13 lessons about wisdom. Most of the lessons are introduced by the words “*My son*” and the final lesson is given by wisdom herself. The lessons are about:

1. **Avoiding evil. 1:8-33**

In this lesson we are encouraged to listen to the advice of our parents and be wary of those who would entice us towards evil. Wisdom says that we if we reject this advice we will pay the price. Conversely, those who listen to wisdom will *live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm.*

2. **Choosing wisdom. 2:1-22**

Wisdom comes from God. If we apply ourselves to wisdom and seek for insight and understanding we will *understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.* This will bring many benefits including victory in life, protection from evil, and understanding of the right way to live. Wisdom will save us from the ways of the wicked, including those who would seduce us to evil, and we will *walk in the ways of good people and keep to the paths of the righteous.*

3. **Trusting God. 3:1-10**

Living according to God’s ways brings many blessings, but this requires us to *trust in the Lord* with all our hearts, and *lean not on our own understanding.* He will *direct our paths* if we *acknowledge Him in all our ways.*

4. **Accepting discipline. 3:11-20**

The Lord disciplines those He loves, as a loving father disciplines his children. Discipline is an ongoing theme throughout Proverbs. The Hebrew word for ‘discipline’ is *musar*. It can be translated as ‘discipline’, ‘correction’, ‘chastening’, ‘warning’. Unfortunately this word has a slightly different meaning today with more emphasis on punishment e.g. by smacking. The original intent of ‘discipline’ throughout Proverbs is the loving correction and guidance that a father exercises to protect his children from harm. Wisdom and discipline are thus closely related. Those who accept discipline and follow wisdom *will be blessed.*

5. **Common sense. 3:21-35**

Wisdom and common sense will help to keep us safe, and will guard us from getting involved in unwise actions. This gives a great sense of security leading to sound sleep, confidence, and honour in the sight of others. *The Lord will be your confidence.*

6. **Seeking wisdom and understanding. 4:1-9**

Here the teacher encourages us to *get wisdom, get understanding,* just like he had received from his father. If we earnestly seek these attributes they will protect us, bring us honour, and give us a sense of grace. *Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it costs you all you have, get understanding.*



7. Keeping on the right path. 4:10-19

We also need a strong determination to not walk in the ways of evil people. The path of the righteous shines brighter and brighter, but the path of the wicked is like *deep darkness*. Heeding this advice will protect us from evil consequences and bring us life and health.

8. Guarding the heart. 4:20-27

We are encouraged to make a priority of guarding our hearts. *Above all, guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life*. This involves choosing to do right and avoiding all kinds of evil in what we listen to, get involved in, look at and choose to walk in. It means being total committed to doing what is right.

9. Sexual purity. 5:1-23

The teacher now strongly describes the perils of adultery. He shows that the way to avoid the inevitable harm that comes from any kind of adulterous relationship is to have strong self-discipline, exercise discretion, keep well away from temptation, listen to the wisdom of leaders, be faithful, and have a strong relationship with your spouse. Doing this will mean you can *rejoice with the wife of your youth* and *be ever captivated by her love*. Our ways in this area are *in full view of the Lord* and *He examines all of our paths*.

10. Foolishness. 6:1-19

In this lesson we are warned about foolish activities like making risky pledges, being lazy and being taken in by a *scoundrel and villain*. In each case the sensible thing to do is get out of the situation as quickly as possible. Solomon then lists *six things the Lord hates*: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that rush into evil, false witnesses and those who stir up dissension.

11. Immoral relationships. 6:20-35

Next is another lesson on immoral relationships. You will be protected if you follow the teaching of godly parents by not lusting after illicit sexual relationships. Those who fall in this area lack judgment and destroy themselves. They will also have to face the fury and revenge of other wounded parties.

12. Prostitution and adultery. 7:1-27

This lesson gives a graphic description of the seductive ways of an adulteress. The pleasures she offers may be alluring but *her house is a highway to the grave leading down to the chambers of death*. Wisdom says to keep well away!

13. Wisdom's appeal. 8:1–9:18

Wisdom now speaks directly to us. Here *she takes her stand*. She wants us to choose *her instruction instead of silver; knowledge instead of gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her*. She wants what is best for us and counsels us to *hate evil, seek understanding, and walk in the ways of righteousness, and along the paths of justice*. Her ways lead to great blessing. The Lord established this wisdom right from the beginning and rejoices when His creation operates in this way. *Whoever finds me finds life and receives favour from the Lord*. Wisdom is like a generous hostess offering a banquet meal leading to a meaningful life, but only those who are wise will embrace this truth. *Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a wise man and he will add to his learning*.

Ultimately *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding*. Those who know this will be wise and will have years added to their lives. Those who reject it and turn aside to the 'pleasures' of deception are *in the depths of the grave*.

The wisdom personified here reflects the wisdom of God revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ. See Luke 2:52; Colossians 2:3; Revelation 5:12.

Christ has become for us wisdom from God – that is our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 1 Corinthians 1:30

The proverbs of Solomon (Proverbs 10:1–22:16)

Solomon wrote *three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five*. (1 Kings 4:32). This section contains 375 of these proverbs. The proverbs are all just one verse, and consist of a statement and then a comparison or contrast. There is no attempt to group the proverbs around themes so there are occasional repetitions and differing points of view on the same issue.

To get maximum value from this section you need to read each proverb independently from all the others; identify its message, and then seek to apply the wisdom it contains to your own life and situation. You will miss a lot of the wisdom if you read too quickly! Be aware that many of the proverbs deal with very ordinary issues, and that they were written in a particular cultural situation that may not exist today. Also that many of them reflect human wisdom and common sense rather than God's ways or requirements. Taken as a whole, though, the proverbs of Solomon can give much wisdom that will help in your everyday life. This is especially so as one of the main emphases is that *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*. The proverbs will help you gain a stronger respect for God's ways, and a greater determination to live in these ways.



Some of the main themes covered in the proverbs of Solomon are:

- Blessing comes to the righteous and judgment to the ungodly.
- Being unwise, foolish, or lazy has significant consequences.
- Wisdom comes from God and is to be worked out in practical ways.
- Words can be used to bless and to harm.
- Listening to others broadens understanding.
- Accepting correction gives guidance for life's directions.
- Generosity leads to prosperity.
- Living in close relationship with God is better than any other way.
- Personal integrity before God, yourself and others has great rewards.
- Justice and honesty are needed for a fair society.
- True friendship is rare but extremely valuable.
- Riches and poverty have practical consequences but they are also moral issues for all.
- Strong and healthy families are vital for people and societies.
- Older people are worthy of respect.

Here are a few selected proverbs with comments on their interpretation.

Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth. 10:4

This is a broad generalisation designed to help us be more industrious in our work. It doesn't mean that all poor people are lazy or that being diligent will always bring wealth.

The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it. 10:22.

This proverb complements the last one. It doesn't promise that God will bring Christians wealth and that they won't have troubles. The proverb is a commentary on life at the time it was written, and shows one aspect of God's nature: His desire to bless.

For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure. 11:14

This proverb shows that we need ideas and input from many others to get a broad perspective. This applies even at the national level. It doesn't guarantee victory for any nation in war.

The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise. 11:30

This proverb can easily be misinterpreted if modern understandings of words are applied to it. The term "win souls" today means to go out and evangelise so that people accept Christ and are saved. This meaning was far from that which Solomon intended in writing the proverb!

An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up. 12:25

Universal common sense that consistently works in real life!

He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm. 13:20

This proverb is an expression of what is often called "the law of association" which shows that we become like those we associate with. This principle is also found in Exodus 23:2 and 2 Peter 2:19.

Misfortune pursues the sinner, but prosperity is the reward for the righteous. 13:21

This proverb is a general commentary on human life. It doesn't mean that those who experience misfortune are sinners or that all righteous people will be rewarded. Generalised proverbs like this should not be regarded as universal truths.

A cheerful look brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones. 15:30

Again, this is a generalisation. If we have a cheerful outlook we feel much better. The proverb should not be taken literally to say that being cheerful will heal bone cancer.

Whoever gives heed to instruction prospers, and blessed is he who trusts in the Lord. 16:20

This proverb is typical of many of Solomon's proverbs. It encourages us to be good listeners, stay open to learning and to put our trust in the Lord. Good advice!

Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed. 16:3

This proverb sounds great, but it doesn't fit with the rest of scripture and it certainly doesn't work out always in practice. It is certainly good to commit what we do to the Lord, but the rest of Scripture shows that God will bless what He has initiated, not whatever we decide to do. The proverb encourages trust in the Lord but should not be "claimed" as a promise in an attempt to secure God's blessing. Success in life comes as we hear God's voice, are obedient, are led by the Holy Spirit, bring in the Kingdom of God, and fulfil God's purposes for our lives.

He who winks with his eye is plotting perversity; he who purses his lips is bent on evil. 16:30

Really! If this is true we had all better stop winking. This kind of proverb is not to be taken literally. It is just saying that those who are intent on evil show it in different ways.

Grey hair is a crown of splendour; it is attained by a righteous life. 16:31

This is not saying that all elderly grey-haired people have had a righteous life. The principle implied in the proverb is that elderly people who have had a righteous life are worthy of respect.

Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue. 17:28

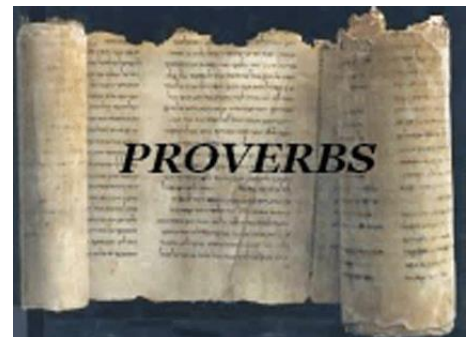
Another generalisation but one that is based on a lot of wisdom. Staying silent and listening is often much better than talking out of ignorance.

He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favour from the Lord. 18:22

This proverb honours wives (which was unusual in the culture of the day where women were seen as chattels, with little value). It also recognises the value of marriage.

He who gets wisdom loves his own soul; he who cherishes understanding prospers. 19:8

This proverb contains a lesson that Solomon had obviously learned by experience. Investing in one's own personal growth in wisdom and understanding should be a priority in our lives.



It is not fitting for a fool to live in luxury – how much worse for a slave to rule over princes. 19:10

This is obviously a broad generalisation that was strongly affected by the culture and thinking of the day. It should not be used to promote affluence or slavery, or denigrate the under-privileged.

Many are the purposes of a man's heart but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails. 19:21

This proverb contains much truth that has proved relevant for all times. We all have deep purposes in our hearts, but ultimately God's will is what takes place because He is sovereign over everything.

Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it. 22:6

This proverb has often been "claimed" as a promise from God, and led many to disappointment. The proverb is a generalised commentary on life, and not a universal truth

Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him. 22:15

This proverb has been used as a justification for smacking of children. The words for "rod of discipline" in their original meanings apply to the rods used by shepherds to guide their sheep in the right direction. These rods were not used for punishment; rather they were used to give direction in life.

The “sayings of the wise” (Proverbs 22:17-24:22)

The proverbs in this section have been collated from the writings of “the wise”. They are similar in content to Solomon’s proverbs, but different in style. Rather than being simple one-verse statements they are longer “sayings” and have been arranged into groups around themes. We are encouraged to *listen to the sayings of the wise* so that our *trust may be in the Lord*. Issues covered in this section include exploitation of the poor, attitude to work, jealousy and envy, discipline of children, the perils of strong drink, respect for parents, wisdom, and the fear of the Lord.

More "sayings of the wise" (Proverbs 24:23-34)

This section adds to the previous one and deals with issues such as partiality, honesty, retribution, and laziness.

Proverbs of Solomon copied by the men of Hezekiah (Proverbs 25-29)

This section contains more of Solomon’s proverbs to add to the ones in Chapters 10-22. These proverbs were selected, edited and *copied by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah*. They cover many of the same issues as in the earlier section, and are occasionally arranged into groups around themes. These include:

- The power of a king. 25:2-7
- Going to court. 25:8-10
- Getting on with others. 25:8-28
- Foolishness. 26:1-12
- Laziness. 26:13-16
- Troublemakers. 26:17-27
- Relationships. 27:1-19
- Testing. 27:20-22
- Work. 27:23-27
- The law. 28:1-9
- Right living. 28:10-29:27

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you. 25:21,22.

These verses are quoted by Paul in Romans 12:20, as an example of how to love others.

Sayings of Agur (Proverbs 30)

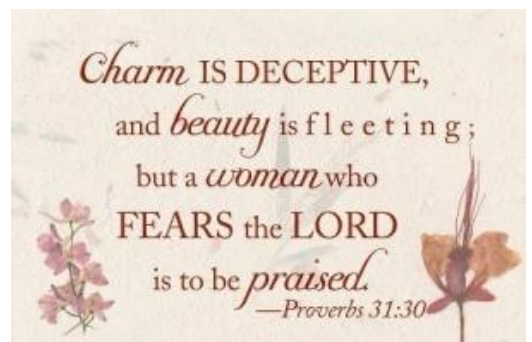
Agur was not an Israelite. He was one of the 12 sons of Ishmael (Genesis 25:14) and came from Massa in northern Arabia. Agur acknowledged that he didn’t have *knowledge of the Holy One*. Even so, he recognized that *every word of God is flawless* and that *He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him*. Agur uses an interesting approach in his teachings: he gives a number of examples about issues like slander and cursing; being satisfied with life; the wonder of creation; wisdom; stateliness, and foolishness. He then lists three or four points about each and gets his readers to ponder on them and perhaps add to the list from their own experience. His personal search for the Lord is reflected in verses 7-9, and indicates that he had a strong sense of integrity and a great desire to honour the Lord.

Sayings of King Lemuel (Proverbs 31:1-9)

Lemuel also came from Massa. His name means “belonging to God,” and he obviously had a godly mother. Lemuel’s mother taught him about sexual purity, the dangers of alcohol and the need to *speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves*. It is possible that the next section about a virtuous woman was also written by Lemuel, and may reflect the godliness of his mother.

Praise of the virtuous woman (Proverbs 31:10-31)

This section is an acrostic – each verse starting with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. After so many proverbs about immoral women it is refreshing to finish Proverbs with a wonderful picture of a godly, wise, and industrious wife and mother. The *wife of noble character* may be *hard to find* but she has many admirable qualities including a close relationship with God, trustworthiness, strong work ethic, dedication to her husband and family, love, foresight, wisdom, and kindness. Her children *call her blessed* and her husband praises her. She is a great example to all women.



Proverbs quoted in the New Testament

Many proverbs are quoted in the New Testament. Here are the main ones that are quoted directly. Notice how the New Testament writers don't necessarily quote verbatim. This is partly because of translation differences from Hebrew to Latin to Greek to English, and partly because the writers were using the proverbs to make a point and so quoted what they felt was most useful.

New Testament	Proverbs
<i>God will repay each person according to what they have done.</i> Romans 2:6	<i>Will he not repay everyone according to what they have done?</i> Proverbs 24:12
<i>If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.</i> Romans 12:20	<i>If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you.</i> Proverbs 25:21,22
<i>My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.</i> Hebrews 12:5,6	<i>My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.</i> Proverbs 3:11-12
<i>God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.</i> James 4:6	<i>He mocks proud mockers but shows favor to the humble and oppressed.</i> Proverbs 3:34
<i>Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.</i> 1 Peter 4:8	<i>Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs.</i> Proverbs 10:12
<i>If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?</i> 1 Peter 4:18	<i>If the righteous receive their due on earth, how much more the ungodly and the sinner!</i> Proverbs 11:31
<i>God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.</i> 1 Peter 5:5	<i>He mocks proud mockers but shows favor to the humble and oppressed.</i> Proverbs 3:34
<i>Of them the proverbs are true: "A dog returns to its vomit," and, "A sow that is washed returns to her wallowing in the mud."</i> 2 Peter 2:22	<i>As a dog returns to its vomit, so fools repeat their folly.</i> Proverbs 26:11

Discussion questions

What is a proverb? Who wrote the proverbs in the Book of Proverbs? How are they influenced by the culture of the time they were written? How relevant are they for life today?

What is wisdom literature? What other books in the Bible are classified as wisdom literature? How does this influence the way we interpret these books as part of the Bible and as revelations of God's word?

Are the proverbs in The Book of Proverbs to be considered as God's words or the words of their writers? How does this influence the authority that proverbs have in the Bible? Do the proverbs all contain absolute truth? How should we interpret the proverbs to gain maximum benefit from the wisdom they contain?

There are many themes in the Book of Proverbs including wisdom, the fear of the Lord, laziness, sexual purity, family relationships, aging, foolishness, Choose one of these themes and identify all proverbs related to the theme. Then collate the teaching that comes from the full set of proverbs on the theme. What important principles emerge? What do you learn about the theme that is relevant for your life today?

What have you learned from your study of Proverbs? How will you apply this in your life in future?