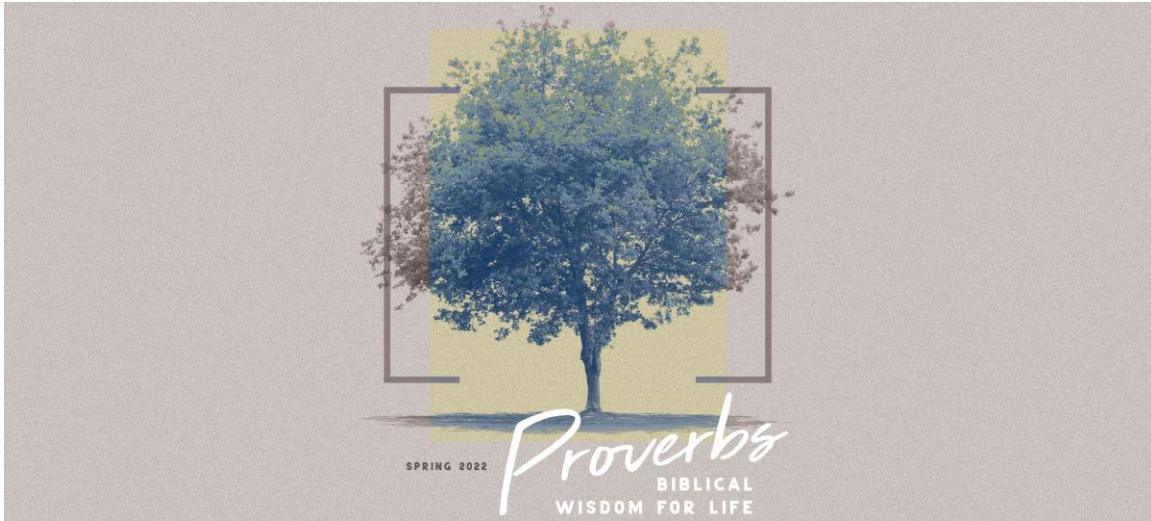


Week 1: Proverbs 1: Introduction to Proverbs

Hook



Main Point: Wisdom comes from the Lord.

A study conducted by *Forbes* magazine sought to answer this question: "If you could say in one word what you want more of in life, what would that be?" Below are the top eight results.

1. Happiness
2. Money
3. Freedom
4. Peace
5. Joy
6. Balance
7. Fulfillment
8. Confidence

Break your LifeGroup Bible Study into smaller units and ask them to answer the same question. Share the results and ask how class members came to their conclusions.

Transition: Today's lesson will follow the plight of Solomon, a king who so valued wisdom that he chose it above every other gift.¹

Week 1: Proverbs 1

Book

Main Point: Wisdom comes from the Lord.

1 Kings 3:5–15 and 4:29–34 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Solomon and the value of wisdom.

Q: Why did Solomon feel he needed wisdom most of all?

Q: Why was God pleased that Solomon asked for wisdom?

In the Old Testament, Solomon is the person most associated with wisdom, so it is fitting that most of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament – Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs – is attributed to him.² First Kings tells us that Solomon's wisdom was greater than anyone in the ancient world, so great that sages from all over came to learn from him (1 Kings 4:29–34). It also tells us that Solomon's wisdom was so great because it came from God.

God's wisdom is not like human wisdom. Human wisdom leads to selfish ambition, but God's wisdom leads to humility, peace and mercy (James 3:13–17). God's wisdom makes even the greatest human wisdom look like foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18–31). His thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8–9; Jeremiah 51:15–17). God alone is the source of true wisdom (Proverbs 2:6).

When God told Solomon he could ask for anything, he asked for wisdom to be able to “discern between good and evil” when he was judging between the people (1 Kings 3:9). Wisdom is more than just intellectual knowledge; it is knowing what is right. Theologian J. I. Packer wrote, “In the Holy Scriptures, wisdom, when used of God and good men, always carries a strong moral connotation. It is conceived as being pure, loving and good.”³ The only way that we can know good from evil, right from wrong, is to have the wisdom of God. Mankind's reason alone cannot determine what is good. Our hearts are deceitful. Left to our own devices without God, we rationalize what we *want* to be right to fit our desires (Jeremiah 17:9).

Pastor and author A. W. Tozer said, “Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it. Wisdom is, in fact, the practical side of moral goodness. As such, it is found in its fullness only in God. He alone is naturally and entirely and invariable wise.”⁴ Wisdom is knowing what is right and applying it, resulting in a skillfully led, godly life.⁵

God was pleased with Solomon's request; wisdom was the most important thing the king would need to rule the people well and to live his own life well. This is why Proverbs continually tells us to prioritize the pursuit of wisdom (2:1–6; 4:5–9).

We may not feel as wise as King Solomon, but all Christians have the gift of “wisdom from above” by the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us (John 3:1–8). The Spirit gives us the wisdom of God “in words not taught us by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual” (1 Corinthians 2:12–14).

Reminiscent of Solomon's story, James promises us that any time we lack wisdom, all we have to do is ask God “who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him” (James 1:5). God *wants* to give us His wisdom, to share what is good and right. He's not trying to hide it from us or make us figure it out on our own. God has told us in His Word what is right, and He will explain it to us through His Spirit when we ask in prayer.

Q: How do you know for a fact that true wisdom only comes from God? How have you experienced that truth in your life?

Q: Why do you think it's important to listen to God's wisdom in a world that is trying to tell you its version of wisdom – what is right and wrong? How can we trust that God's wisdom is truly right?

Q: How does it make you feel to know that God's wisdom is just waiting for you if you ask?

Proverbs 1:1–6 [Read]

Talking Point 2: What is the nature and purpose of Proverbs?

Q: What is the purpose of this collection of proverbs?

Q: Why specifically does it talk about using them to teach the young?

Proverbs can be a hard book to study because it's not a story or a letter with a typical plotline or train of thought. It is a collection of sayings. It's more like reading a book of quotations than a novel, a poem or a textbook. By nature, Proverbs are short one- or two-line sayings that are easy to memorize and therefore repeat to others, especially children, such as the modern proverb “a penny saved is a penny earned.”

Solomon addressed Proverbs to his son (1:8), though it was not only for his son but all of his “children,” the whole nation of Israel. The book of Proverbs is a compilation of hundreds of bite-sized proverbs with an introduction (chapters 1–9) and a conclusion (chapters 30–31). The Proverbs contain mnemonic and poetic devices that help readers commit them to memory. So, while they are carefully and intentionally arranged, it reads a lot differently than the other books of the Bible.⁶

The purpose of Proverbs is declared from the very beginning – to attain wisdom. Solomon received wisdom directly from God, but he assured his son that if he studied the proverbs in this book, he could also gain godly wisdom. The Hebrew word for *wisdom* means much more than just intellectual knowledge. It is *applied* knowledge, how you live out what you know. Professor of the Old Testament and author Robert McCabe calls it “biblical skill in living.”⁷ The proverbs are not just philosophical; they are practical wisdom for how to live well in God’s world. They are framed as guidance to young people who are learning how to go out and live morally and beneficially as God’s people in the world. But their value is by no means limited to a single age group; they are for all of us.

The Proverbs are practical advice, not abstract theology or narrative. At first glance, this would seem make them the easiest of all genres of biblical literature to interpret. We just do what they say, right? Yet, because of the nature of proverbs, we must be extra careful when applying them to our modern daily lives. Because they are so practical, it would be easy to forget to do the very important work of exegesis and historical context. As with any other book of the Bible, we can’t take them out of context, just asking what the proverbs mean to us without first asking what they meant to the original hearers.⁸ When studying Proverbs, it’s important to remember:

- They are wisdom literature, not the Law. They give godly wisdom for practical situations, but they aren’t laws/commands.⁹
- They are written in Hebrew poetry, so the interpretive standards of that genre apply. They use figurative language, parallelism, couplets, metaphor/simile, repetition, poetic meter, alliterations, word plays, and so on. These features would have made it easier for an ancient reader to memorize and repeat, but a lot is lost in translation from Hebrew into English and therefore lost on us.¹⁰
- They are often simple and/or overstated, so we need to be careful not to read too much into them and make them say things they don’t intend to say.¹¹
- Perhaps most importantly, the proverbs are not *promises* of success. For example, “The fear of the Lord adds length to the life, but the years of the wicked are cut short” (10:27) is not a *guarantee* that you will live a long life if you follow Jesus. Think of committed missionaries who died young even as they were sharing the

Gospel, killed by the very people to whom they were witnessing. In the same way, “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (22:6) is not a *guarantee* that your children won’t walk away from the Lord. There are many believers who did everything right, but their kids still turned away.¹² The proverbs are the best way to live, and you are much more likely to have success in life if you follow them, but anything can happen.

The proverbs are intended to be read and studied in light of the prologue, with its emphasis on the need to attain wisdom and to reject folly, to walk in righteousness and shun evil. This is the focus and the purpose of each of the hundreds of proverbs in this book.

Q: Why can it be difficult to understand ancient Hebrew poetry? What can you do to help you understand it better?

Q: Why should pursuing wisdom be a goal in your life? How will it help you?

Q: Compare and contrast the promises in Scripture (see 1 John 1:9) with the counsel of the Proverbs (see Proverbs 22:6).

Proverbs 1:7–9 [Read]

Talking Point 3: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Q: Why is the fear of the Lord the beginning of wisdom?

In this opening chapter, we find the thesis of the whole book (1:7). No matter what specific advice each proverb gives, it is rooted in the “fear of the Lord.” Not being afraid of God but having reverence for God. Awe of God. Understanding that God is God, and we are not. Respecting and trusting that His way is right, not relying on our own understanding (3:5–6). There are three other words in the Old Testament for “fear” that mean being afraid. If Solomon wanted to say we should be afraid of God, he would have used one of these other words. This word, *yirah*, is almost always used in the context of fear of the Lord in the Old Testament.

Proverbs 1:7 says “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,” while Proverbs 9:10 says the exact same thing but uses the word “wisdom” instead. While they are two different words in Hebrew, they are used interchangeably in wisdom literature. The word translated “knowledge” doesn’t just mean knowing information or facts, it’s about knowing right from wrong. Both words mean discernment or understanding about what is good and right and godly.¹³ Wisdom is the *practical, skillful application* of knowledge.

This is why Proverbs is such a practical book. It's not just about having the knowledge and understanding of how to live, it's about actually living it out.

Proverbs 1:7 is the key to unlocking the wisdom of Proverbs. If you want to be wise, the beginning of this knowledge and wisdom is the fear of the Lord. Proverbs is all about living in the "fear of the Lord" – that's what it means to live wisely.

The fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of wisdom because wisdom begins with a proper relationship with God, which leads to a moral lifestyle. We can't start with just trying to do the moral thing in our own strength. We start with a relationship with God, and as we walk with Him, we learn His ways. This is what makes the biblical book of Proverbs different from the wisdom literature of other nations, this relationship with the one, true, personal God who loves us. In Proverbs, fearing God is connected to knowing God (2:4–5) and results in hating evil (8:13). It also produces confidence (14:26), humility (3:7), and contentment (15:16). Fear of the Lord is an unconditional, reverential submission to the Sovereign God.¹⁴

Wise people want to learn God's ways because they know He knows better than they do, that He is the source of all wisdom. God created me and He created the world, so He knows best how I should live in the world. Only fools despise teaching and correction because only fools think they already know everything! We begin our journey of wisdom with a proper relationship with God. Then we let Him teach us, mold us, and grow us for the rest of our lives. None of us will ever be done learning and growing in wisdom, not even the wisest man who ever lived.

Q: How have you grown in wisdom since you began walking with the Lord?

Q: Who is the wisest person you know? How would you describe their relationship with God?

Q: Why is it essential for the believer to live in "fear" of God?

Q: In what ways do you need to trust the Lord's wisdom over your own right now?

Week 1: Proverbs 1

Took

Main Point: Wisdom comes from the Lord.

CHALLENGES

Between 2000 and 2019, the rate of those who earned a bachelor's degree or higher among 25- to 29-year-olds increased from 29 to 39 percent.¹⁵ The average college tuition for public, in-state schools is \$10,338, public out of state schools is \$22,698 and private schools is \$38,185.¹⁶ The sacrifice we are willing to make to achieve academic knowledge is substantial – what would you be willing to sacrifice to grow in wisdom?

Q: What does it take to grow in wisdom?

Q: What steps could you take to increase the likelihood that this semester's study of Proverbs will increase your "biblical skill in living"?

Challenges

THINK: What would it look like for you to really live in the fear of God in all areas of your life? Not just to worship Him on Sunday mornings or praise Him in your prayers, but truly live your life in a way that shows that you fear Him? That you honor Him as God of the universe and Lord of your life. That you live as if He is God, and you are not. That you trust His words and His ways over your own desires and thoughts and worldly wisdom. What would that look like in your day-to-day life? What things would change?

PRAY for God to give you His wisdom and His discernment, just as He gave Solomon. You can even read the words of Solomon's prayer aloud, praying it as your own. Or you can write a similar prayer with your own life details substituted for his. Pray that as you go through this semester, God will give you ears to hear His wisdom above all the competing "wise sayings" of the world and understand how to apply it to your life.

ACT: Memorize Proverbs 9:10. Repeat it to yourself every morning when you wake up, every time you have a meal or a break during your day, and again at night before you go to bed. See how it might change the way you live each day this week.

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kathycaprino/2016/05/24/the-top-8-things-people-desperately-desire-but-cant-seem-to-attain/?sh=98471ed7086c>

² See the “Proverbs” *Holman Commentary*, page 1 for more information regarding authorship.

³ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1973).

⁴ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row Publishers, 1961).

⁵ Sid S. Buzzell, “Proverbs,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 907.

⁶ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

⁷ Robert V. McCabe, “Interpreting Proverbs” *Old Testament Studies* - <http://www.oldtestamentstudies.org/my-papers/other-papers/wisdom-literature/interpreting-proverbs/>

⁸ Robert V. McCabe, “Interpreting Proverbs” *Old Testament Studies* - <http://www.oldtestamentstudies.org/my-papers/other-papers/wisdom-literature/interpreting-proverbs/>

⁹ Robert V. McCabe, “Interpreting Proverbs” *Old Testament Studies* - <http://www.oldtestamentstudies.org/my-papers/other-papers/wisdom-literature/interpreting-proverbs/>

¹⁰ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

¹¹ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

¹² Alan Shlemon, “Proverbs Are Not Promises,” *Stand to Reason*, July 17, 2017 - <https://www.str.org/w/proverbs-are-not-promises>

¹³ F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1994).

¹⁴ Gary V. Smith, “Is There a Place for Job’s Wisdom in Old Testament Theology?” *Trinity Journal* 13 (Spring 1992).

¹⁵ <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=27>

¹⁶ <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/paying-for-college/articles/paying-for-college-infographic>