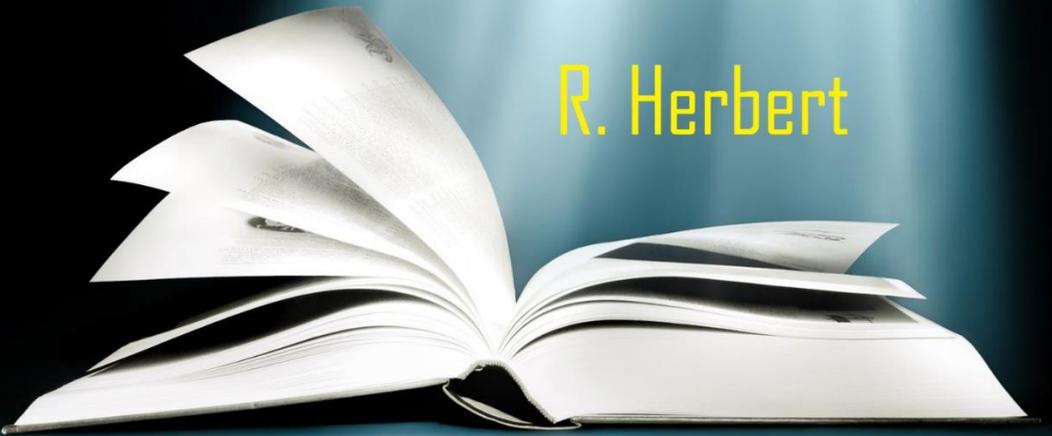


A Tactical Christianity Book

Timeless Wisdom for
Today's World

SPOTLIGHT
ON THE
PROVERBS

R. Herbert



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PROVERBS

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Today's World

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All *italicized* emphases in quotations from the Bible have been added by the author.

About the Author: The author served as an ordained minister and church pastor for a number of years and holds an earned Ph.D. degree in the languages, cultures and archaeology of the ancient Near East and biblical world. He writes for a number of Christian publications and for the websites TacticalChristianity.org and LivingWithFaith.org. His other e-books are available for free download from those websites and from FreeChristianEBooks.org.

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INTRODUCTION: THE TREASURES OF WISDOM

Blessed are those who find wisdom,
those who gain understanding,
for she is more profitable than silver
and yields better returns than gold.
She is more precious than rubies;
nothing you desire can compare with her. (Proverbs 3:13-15)

The Nature of Proverbs

The book of Proverbs is often said to represent a collection of “human wisdom,” and although it is fully accepted into the Bible, it is frequently regarded as a book of practical rather than spiritual insights. Yet this viewpoint seriously underestimates the book.

What separates the biblical proverbs from the homely wisdom of everyday sayings like “don’t pet a growling dog” is the fact that while the principles Proverbs teaches may not always seem remarkable, they often have surprising depths of meaning and significance. You can meditate all day on “don’t pet a growling dog” and not get much more out of it, whereas many biblical proverbs are multifaceted – like gemstones that catch the light in different ways as you turn them. The more you look at them, the more you see in them. Additionally, it would obviously be a bad idea to try to stroke an angry dog, but with many of the Bible’s proverbs the veracity of their advice is not that obvious. Biblical wisdom is much more than another synonym for knowledge or understanding – it is often our willingness to submit ourselves to accepting guidance that may not be obvious, willingness to override our own experience with that of others.

Ultimately we have two choices in life: either we can learn from others or we learn from our own experience, and our own experience is a hard teacher (she gives the test first and then the lesson!). So, in one way the book of Proverbs is like the *Cliff Notes* of living well – if we purchase such a concise study guide, we do so because it will help make complex principles more easily understandable so we can learn the lesson before the test shows up. Yet, in another way the proverbs are much deeper than their small size would suggest.

Think about a biblical example of this. One of the Ten Commandments tells us “you shall not steal.” This command is short and to the point and really tells you most of what you need to know to stay out of all kinds of trouble. But the commandment simply summarizes the issue – the book of Proverbs puts the commandment into working clothes and gives us practical examples of things we might not have thought of as theft. It also reminds us of some of the effects of stealing we might want to think about, because they will help “vaccinate” us against the urge to steal if we are tempted.

For example, Proverbs tells us that “Stolen bread tastes sweet, but it turns to gravel in the mouth” (Proverbs 20:17 NLT). That resonates with us in a much different way than simply telling us we should not or must not steal. Perhaps it makes us remember the time we stole a cookie when we were a kid and how we felt when we got caught. Or it reminds us of a movie we saw about how a man got set up to steal something for someone else then had to take the fall for it.

So, the commandment gives us the truth we need, but the proverb puts it into the perspective of everyday life – fleshes it out and relates it to us in terms of visceral experience. In short, this proverb paints the problem in undesirable but realistic colors, and that is good if for no other reason than it forces us to think about consequences and how living right really is better in so many cases.

When we understand this – that the proverbs often give us a physical window into a spiritual principle and ways to help us understand and apply it in our everyday lives – we realize the book of Proverbs is much more than an ancient version of the modern “self-help” book. Such books usually encourage us to do what we need to do while the proverbs, on the other hand, often help us to see what we do not realize we need to know and do.

The proverbs may be small, but they are indeed gems of understanding that can help develop our spiritual lives more than hours of lectures on morality or many pages of books on religion. A proverb, like a picture, can be worth a thousand words.

So, what do we need to know to help us understand and utilize some of these little treasures we call proverbs? First, we need just a little bit of background. The next few paragraphs summarize some points that will make us much better equipped to look at the Bible’s proverbs with new eyes and to begin to really learn from them.

The Structure of Proverbs

While most modern proverbs consist of a simple statement such as “one good turn deserves another,” biblical proverbs follow the pattern of much ancient Near Eastern wisdom poetry in that they usually express their ideas in two halves which are in some way parallel to each other (see Appendix 1: Proverbs as Poetry). In that sense, each proverb is really two proverbs, and we need to think about each half separately.

Although the arrangement of many proverbs may seem to be somewhat random, the proverbs are often organized into specific groupings. There is a prevalence of two- or three-verse groups (called “unit proverbs”), but there are also a number of “proverb clusters” such as Proverbs 26:1-12 which all talk about the “fool,” and Proverbs 26:13-16 which all talk about the “slacker.” Proverbs’ seemingly critical use of negative terms like this must be seen in the context of contrast – the fool and the wise man are used as abstract representatives of categories of people based on their response to wisdom rather than terms used in criticism of actual individuals, as we will see as we go along. Recognizing these internal groups can help us study many proverbs more effectively, though in other cases we must bring proverbs together from various parts of the book in order to study what Proverbs says about a given subject or theme.

It’s also important to realize that the book of Proverbs is an anthology or collection of wisdom sayings that were written by a number of authors at different times. More precisely, it is a “collection of collections” of these proverbs which seem to have been assembled separately and brought together in the book as we know it. The book of Proverbs also contains two major internal sections representing a “first edition,” which was then expanded with the addition of a second part at a somewhat later date (Proverbs 25:1). This explains why a number of proverbs are found in both the first and second sections of the book (compare Proverbs 18:8 and 26:22; 21:9 and 25:24; etc.).

But the two major internal sections of Proverbs have noticeably different themes. The first is aimed at the young and begins with the proverb “A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son brings grief to his mother” (Proverbs 10:1), while the second section is aimed at the mature, especially rulers, and begins with: “to search out a matter is the glory of kings” (Proverbs 25:2).

The Significance of Proverbs

Many of the proverbs were composed by the wise King Solomon, of course – which means they are fully accredited wisdom! According to 1 Kings 4:32, Solomon composed some three thousand proverbs in his life (of which some nine hundred are included in the book of Proverbs), and the king also collected many other wise sayings from his own and other cultures, some of which are included in the book of Proverbs. For example, Proverbs 24:23 begins a sub-section “the sayings of the wise” with the word for “wise” being in the plural showing multiple authors were included; and Proverbs 30:1 and 31:1 begin the proverbs of Agur and Lemuel, whose names do not appear to be Israelite. This wide range of background explains why the biblical book of Proverbs also follows a similar structure and style to that of many other ancient Near Eastern wisdom works that were popular “wisdom literature” throughout the periods before and within which Proverbs was composed.

But the book of Proverbs is more than just a collection of wisdom sayings from around the ancient world. It is, as we would say today, a “curated” collection that has been carefully put together for maximum value. Proverbs is also more than the sum of its parts. It is more than simply a collection of *unrelated* sayings. A thread which is a theme runs throughout all the proverbs: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7). This theme stands at the very beginning of the book as well as at its very end (Proverbs 31:30) and is repeated within the book as well (Proverbs 9:10 and 15:33). As we will see, it is a theme that forms the basis of all the proverbs given throughout the book and sets it apart from similar compositions in the ancient world. It is also a theme that gives Proverbs an important place within the Hebrew Scriptures: the biblical proverbs don’t just record human wisdom, they seek to apply God’s wisdom to the many situations of everyday life. In a nutshell, Proverbs utilizes human experience as a vehicle for the wisdom God wants to see in our lives. That is why Proverbs doesn’t start with proverbs – the first nine chapters of the book consist of speeches by personifications of God’s wisdom that contextualize wisdom in both the human and divine spheres in order to show the significance of what follows. Only then do the proverbs begin!

The ultimate indication of the spiritual as well as the physical value of proverbs is the fact that Jesus himself frequently utilized the proverbs in his teaching – far more, and in much deeper ways, than many people

realize (see Appendix 2: Proverbs in the New Testament). For example, when Jesus gave the Beatitudes – the most famous part of his Sermon on the Mount – he followed the structure found in some of the proverbs, such as the verses in the opening quotation at the beginning of this Introduction. Jesus obviously studied the proverbs – and there is every reason for us to do so, also (see Appendix 3: Reading the Book of Proverbs).

When it comes to wisdom, many Christians default to what the apostle James tell us: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5). But this does not mean that simply asking for wisdom has replaced study in the New Testament. The book of Proverbs remains a key way in which God does, in fact, give us wisdom – to the degree we study and internalize its principles! As Proverbs tells us:

Let the wise listen to these proverbs and become even wiser. Let those with understanding receive guidance. (Proverbs 1:5-6 NLT)

1. THE TWO ROADS

The book of Proverbs is very much like a map that helps us find the way to a level of happiness in life that we might not find without guidance. But it also maps out a separate road full of dangers and pitfalls that we need to avoid if we are to escape many of life's heartaches. In fact, Proverbs uses this exact analogy in frequently talking about the "way" or "path" of wisdom and happiness, and the alternative way or path of foolishness and failure:

The path of the righteous is like the morning sun,
shining ever brighter till the full light of day. (Proverbs 4:18)

In the paths of the wicked are snares and pitfalls,
but those who would preserve their life stay far from them.
(Proverbs 22:5)

If you have read Proverbs before, you probably noticed that the first nine chapters – the first third of the book – is an extended introduction that provides explanations and examples of these two ways. In fact, the words "path" or "way" occur over fifty times in these chapters. Proverbs 1-9 illustrate the two roads through life by speaking to the reader in a number of voices that represent each of these divergent paths. On the one hand, in the first chapter, we hear the voice of a guiding human father (1:8-19; etc.) and that of the female personification of God's wisdom (Proverbs 1:20-33; etc.) urging us to take the good way. On the other hand, in the second chapter, we hear the voices of two personifications (again, a male and a female) who represent those who take the other way and who try to entice us to join them. We are told that we need wisdom in dealing with those wrongful influences:

to deliver you from the way of evil,
from the man who speaks perversity,
from those who leave the straight paths
to walk in the ways of darkness,
from those who enjoy doing evil
and rejoice in the twistedness of evil,

whose paths are crooked
and whose ways are devious. (Proverbs 2:12-15)

The second chapter of Proverbs is actually an elaborate acrostic or alphabetic poem, the first line of each of its verses beginning with one of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It uses this structure to highlight what is said, much as using italic or bolded type does in modern printed books. The chapter warns the reader especially of the aggression of evil men (Proverbs 2:12-15) and the seduction of evil women (Proverbs 2:16-19). This does not imply that women cannot be aggressive or men seductive, of course; it simply personifies the two problems in an easily understood manner that represented the most likely situations in that time and place. What is so perceptive about Proverbs' use of these personifications is that they clearly show us how natural it is for many human beings to take the way of evil and how unnatural it is to take the opposite and often harder way of what is right. That is an approach that obviously does not agree with many modern views of human nature as being "essentially good." Proverbs denies that view, however, and urges us to do what is necessary to find and follow the path of what is right:

Give careful thought to the paths for your feet. (Proverbs 4:26)

Then you will understand what is right and just
and fair—every good path. (Proverbs 2:9)

The Bible nowhere suggests that we are inherently good or wise. Instead, it shows that these are aspects of the character of God, not humans, that we must learn and grow in. Proverbs in particular shows that this quest is not always easy, but that seeking the right road is always worthwhile:

The path of life leads upward for the prudent
to keep them from going down to the realm of the dead.
(Proverbs 15:24)

This proverb shows that the two paths of life are not simply parallel – one leads constantly upward, while the other leads continually down. Taking the right path may be an uphill climb, but upwards is where we want to be going in life! Another proverb describes the path of good even more succinctly:

In the way of righteousness there is life;
along that path is immortality. (Proverbs 12:28)

This is advice that is echoed throughout the rest of the Bible, not just in terms of future life, but also in fuller and happier life in the here and now. We see it clearly, for example, in the words of the prophet Jeremiah who uses the language of Proverbs in conveying the word of God:

This is what the Lord says:
“Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.” (Jeremiah 6:16)

That is why, in the conclusion of its nine-chapter introduction, the book of Proverbs pits the appeals of its two female personifications – “Lady Wisdom” and “The Foolish Woman” – against each other. In Proverbs 9:1-12 we are told what wisdom says, and in verses 13-18 we are given the words of foolishness. But this is no petty squabble between two disagreeing women. If we look carefully, we find that both women live at “the highest point of the city” (Proverbs 9:3, 14), which is where the temples, palaces, and courts were located in most ancient cities. This seemingly small detail would have been an important statement to ancient readers of Proverbs. The speeches of wisdom and foolishness are actually the final arguments in a power struggle that affects every aspect of the guidance of life.

The setting of these arguments is, in both cases, a banquet – because the Bible uses meals and banquets as symbols of the ultimate expression of a way of life (Proverbs 15:17; etc.). Typical of their respective approaches, wisdom has “prepared her meat and mixed her wine” (Proverbs 9:2) for the banquet she offers, and foolishness offers that “Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!” (Proverbs 9:17). While wisdom offers a way that requires work and honesty, foolishness offers instead an easier, but corrupt, approach to enjoying life. But once again, the difference is not just in temporary or physical results, but in permanent and spiritually important outcomes. The end result of wisdom’s ways is seen in her urging “Leave your simple ways and you will

live” (Proverbs 9:6), which is contrasted with the way of foolishness taken by those who find death instead of life (Proverbs 9:18).

This introduction of Proverbs sets the stage for what is to come – the many individual proverbs that comprise the body of the book and that argue for the way of wisdom. In the next chapter of this book, we will analyze some of those proverbs to see exactly how we go about choosing and following the way to wisdom. We may have found the map, but we need to be sure we know how to read it!

2. GET WISDOM

If you have ever used a map to help you get somewhere, you know that you need to spend a little time determining exactly where your destination is and looking for the best road or route to get you where you want to go. In a similar way, the first thing we must do to find wisdom is to learn exactly what it is and how we arrive at it.

What Wisdom Is

We have already seen how the book of Proverbs speaks of two ways of life – wisdom and foolishness – and how strongly it contrasts them. It is interesting that Proverbs does not characterize the two ways it describes as being the way of “right” and “wrong,” or “good” and “evil.” The two ways certainly do amount to those things, and some proverbs do use that kind of terminology. But in the great majority of cases, Proverbs does not speak to us directly from the perspective of ethics or morality; rather it uses the framework of wisdom and foolishness (or “folly” in some Bible translations).

To understand why Proverbs looks at life from this wisdom/foolishness perspective, we need to take a quick look at the words involved. The Hebrew word from which “wisdom” is most often translated in Proverbs is *khokmah*, which does have a moral aspect but also has other meanings and can signify the application of beneficial knowledge from all areas of life. *Khokmah* can thus include knowledge of such things as nature (1 Kings 4:33), as well as understanding human affairs and even the skill to do things such as foretell the future and interpret dreams (Exodus 7:11; Daniel 5:11-12). Another Hebrew word translated wisdom in Proverbs is *tushiya* (Proverbs 2:7; 3:21; 8:14; 18:1; etc.), which some Bible versions translate as “sound wisdom” and which means general success or well-being as well as the application of knowledge and understanding.

In the same way, the words foolish or foolishness that appear so many times in Proverbs also have a range of meaning that can include failing to behave successfully in various aspects of life as well as turning from or not listening to wisdom or to God’s instruction. The proverbs do not always state this in theological terms, however. Usually, they just contrast the way of the wise with the fool’s self-destructive rejection of the right path.

These facts explain why Proverbs uses the terms foolishness and wisdom with their broad ranges of meaning – so that its teachings can be seen to affect physical success as well as ethical or spiritual morality. In that sense, the wisdom that Proverbs offers has a wider “job description” than right and wrong or good and evil might seem to have. It has secular as well as religious appeal, and while the former is only of temporary value, the latter is, of course, of lasting worth. Nevertheless, Proverbs is written with both audiences in mind, and we can profit from the physical as well as the spiritual applications of its teachings. That is the dual goal of wisdom.

How We Get Wisdom

So now we know where we are going – what the goal is – how does the Bible advise us to achieve that destination? How do we begin the journey to wisdom? What are the routes that will get us there? Proverbs itself gives us six clear and ultimately simple answers to these questions, and we will briefly look at each of them.

1. *Wisdom is rooted in the fear of God.* The very first thing Proverbs tells us regarding how to acquire wisdom is simply this: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). If we need to know what the “fear of the LORD” is, Proverbs makes it clear for us: “To fear the LORD is to hate evil” (Proverbs 8:13A). And Proverbs gives us examples of the kind of evil things we must hate: “pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech” (Proverbs 8:13B). Notice that the examples of evil Proverbs gives encompass wrong thoughts (pride and arrogance), words (perverse speech), and actions (evil behavior). We must respect God enough to want to reject evil of any kind if we are to truly grow in wisdom.

2. *Wisdom must be sought diligently.* Even when we choose the right path, we will never reach the goal with half-hearted efforts. We must pursue wisdom seriously and with real effort – just as if we were looking for a physical treasure:

My son, if you accept my words ...
turning your ear to wisdom
and applying your heart to understanding—
indeed, 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. (Proverbs 2:1-5)

3. *Wisdom requires listening.* The next thing Proverbs tells us in regard to gaining wisdom is the need to actively listen to its teachings: “Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance” (Proverbs 1:5). That is why, from the beginning of the book to its last chapter, Proverbs repeatedly urges us to listen to the wisdom it offers. For example: “Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction, do not forsake your mother’s teaching” (Proverbs 1:8). “Listen, my son, and be wise, and set your heart on the right path” (Proverbs 23:19). “Listen, my son!” (Proverbs 31:2). We do not learn wisdom simply by reading books on the subject or through “osmosis” by being around wise people – wisdom can only be learned by focused listening: “turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding” (Proverbs 2:2).

4. *Wisdom must be deeply learned.* If we go back to the very beginning of Proverbs to its “statement of purpose” – why the proverbs are being given – we find: “The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: To know wisdom ...” (Proverbs 1:1 KJV and many other translations). To “know” wisdom may seem a somewhat strange expression to us, but the Hebrew word *yada* “to know” often means to be the master of a skill. Genesis tells us, for example, that Esau “knew” hunting (Genesis 25:27) – in the same sense that today we might say of a skilled worker, “he really knows his stuff,” or of a doctor, “she really knows medicine.” The idea is not just that these people have learned some facts, but that they have become skilled in utilizing them. We need to “know” wisdom deeply to gain its maximum benefits.

5. *Wisdom requires meditation.* Proverbs stresses that a large part of truly learning wisdom involves thinking about and meditating on its principles and how they apply in our lives. Here are two examples of this: “The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception” (Proverbs 14:8), “The simple believe anything, but the prudent give thought to their steps” (Proverbs 14:15). Notice how Proverbs stresses the alternative to thinking about wisdom is essentially

self-deception that leads to our believing anything that is convenient and psychologically comfortable!

6. *Wisdom requires application.* The final thing Proverbs tells us regarding the procurement of wisdom is that we must apply what we learn in order to continue to grow toward our goal – we cannot “cherry pick” the wisdom we want to apply and that which we do not. This involves a willingness to realize when we are wrong, and a desire to change course if necessary. Failure to do this in any area means that we do not receive wisdom at all. As Lady Wisdom calls out: “If you had repented at my rebuke, then surely I would have poured out my spirit on you; I would have made my words known to you” (Proverbs 1:23 BSB). But, she urges us: “Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of insight” (Proverbs 9:6). In the language of Proverbs, “leaving” our own ways and “walking” in the way of wisdom simply means to apply what we learn.

In the following chapters we will look closely at some of the specific areas in which we can learn and apply the wisdom of Proverbs.

3. THE PEARL OF HUMILITY

In the last chapter we saw that the most fundamental aspect of learning the wisdom Proverbs offers is the “fear of the LORD” – something Proverbs stresses from the beginning of its first chapter (Proverbs 1:7) to the end of its last one (Proverbs 31:30). This fear of God does not mean cringing, apprehensive fear, of course, but the kind of deep and very real respect that young children should have for their parents. We also saw that Proverbs defines fear of the LORD as “to hate evil” (Proverbs 8:13; etc.), but interestingly, Proverbs gives us another definition of the fear of God that builds on this one. Notice, first, the scripture we looked at earlier:

To fear the LORD is to hate evil;
I hate pride and arrogance,
evil behavior and perverse speech. (Proverbs 8:13)

Notice how the first example of evil we are given in this wisdom saying is pride. Proverbs stresses the evils of pride repeatedly, contrasting it continually with humility. For example:

When pride comes, then comes disgrace,
but with humility comes wisdom. (Proverbs 11:2)

Now notice the only other definition that Proverbs offers us of what the fear of God is in practical terms:

Humility is the fear of the Lord;
its wages are riches and honor and life. (Proverbs 22:4)

Proverbs actually places humility alongside the hatred of evil as its two definitions of the fear of God. Once we recognize that fact, we see the principle in other proverbs (Proverbs 15:33; etc.), and we begin to realize that humility is just as important in Proverbs as it is in the New Testament teachings of Jesus! This is because the Bible indicates pride is a primary sin that in some ways is worse than any other. As C.S. Lewis wrote: “It is the complete anti-God state of mind” (*The Case for Christianity*). But pride also has massive and far-reaching effects on our

everyday physical lives. Proverbs addresses both the spiritual and physical aspects of the poison of pride – and the need for humility if we are to grow in wisdom.

In realizing this, we need to be sure to understand what pride is and is not, of course. Proverbs shows that pride is not the emotion of pleasure we experience from the accomplishments of others, of “our” team or family, for example, and it makes this clear:

Children’s children are a crown to the aged,
and parents are the pride of their children. (Proverbs 17:6)

Pride is also not the appreciation of the talents or blessings we may have been given or taking pleasure in even small things we may have been able to accomplish. For example:

A person finds joy in giving an apt reply—
and how good is a timely word! (Proverbs 15:23)

On the other hand, any sense of self-aggrandizement that sees us as better or desires to be better than others certainly is the kind of perversion of perspective that is wrongful pride. Proverbs is unfailing in its condemnation of such an attitude – continually warning that those who elevate themselves will be brought down:

The LORD detests all the proud of heart.
Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished. (Proverbs 16:5)

Pride goes before destruction,
a haughty spirit before a fall. (Proverbs 16:18)

In contrast to the attitude of the proud, Proverbs encourages us to take the path of humility which, if faithfully followed, will bring honor in due course:

Before a downfall the heart is haughty,
but humility comes before honor. (Proverbs 18:12)

Wisdom’s instruction is to fear the LORD,
and humility comes before honor. (Proverbs 15:33)

Proverbs recognizes, as does modern psychology, that ironically pride ultimately brings us the very opposite of what it seems to offer – as does humility:

Pride brings a person low,
but the lowly in spirit gain honor. (Proverbs 29:23)

And even in cases where a humble attitude does not lead to a physically more successful life, Proverbs makes it clear that it is still the better path to take:

Better to be lowly in spirit along with the oppressed
than to share plunder with the proud. (Proverbs 16:19)

Humility, like all aspects of good living, is ultimately its own reward – if for no other reason than it protects us from the evils that pride causes. We will see some of those evils in the following chapters of this book where pride can be seen to bring problems in so many areas of life – while a humble, teachable attitude enables us to see and take the path of wisdom.

When pride comes, then comes disgrace,
but with humility comes wisdom. (Proverbs 11:2)

We will close this chapter with a single small instance of this:

Where there is strife, there is pride,
but wisdom is found in those who take advice. (Proverbs 13:10)

This is a wonderful example of how most biblical proverbs are actually two proverbs – two thoughts that interconnect in some way. Here the initial point is that pride invariably lies at the root of interpersonal conflict, but this verse also clearly stresses a related fact – that pride so often stops us from taking advice that we might need, advice that if taken might avoid or lessen strife or have other advantages:

Listen to advice and accept discipline,
and at the end you will be counted among the wise. (Proverbs 19:20)

The advice to which we must be humble enough to listen is not only of a spiritual nature. It may come from any of a number of physical sources – and be offered by family, friends, co-workers, or others. Or, of course, it may be advice that is offered us by the book of Proverbs itself.

4. DWELLING WITH DISCRETION

Discretion is the most important seldom-mentioned concept of the book of Proverbs! We can characterize it in this way because the word discretion is only mentioned directly a relatively few times in Proverbs – far fewer times than some of the concepts we will look at in the following chapters – yet discretion has a heavyweight status for two reasons.

First, the Hebrew word usually translated “prudence” in English Bibles is an almost identical synonym (in the same way that “big” and “large” are essentially the same in English) and when we include the word prudence in the count as well, the combined discretion/prudence usage suddenly becomes much more noticeable. Secondly, because of the stress that is often placed on these words when they do appear, they are clearly very important qualities.

Notice, for example, how discretion and prudence are mentioned at the outset of Proverbs – as being among the very reasons for the book:

The proverbs of Solomon ...
for giving *prudence* to those who are simple,
knowledge and *discretion* to the young. (Proverbs 1:1, 4)

We should realize that when this verse (and others in Proverbs) speaks of the “simple” it does not have to mean unsophisticated or unintelligent individuals as it might in English. The underlying word means individuals who are “open,” and it can suggest their readiness to learn in the positive sense as well as being open to bad influences. In the same way, the “young” does not necessarily mean children or the immature and could apply to those setting out on the path of wisdom just as, in the New Testament, the apostle Peter tells us to desire spiritual knowledge as “babies” (1 Peter 2:2). But returning to discretion and prudence, we are also told that they are among the key characteristics of wisdom:

“I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence;
I possess knowledge and discretion.” (Proverbs 8:12)

In fact, this section of Proverbs chapter eight is usually understood as being the basis of the “seven pillars of wisdom” with which the personified Wisdom is said to have built and supported her house (Proverbs 9:1).

So, what exactly, from the perspective of wisdom literature, is this important concept of discretion and prudence that is so highly regarded in Proverbs? We can find the answer to that question by looking at how each of these words is used in the book and what they can teach us.

Discretion

The word usually translated as “discretion” in our Bibles is *mezimmah*, which comes from a root meaning “to plan” or “scheme” – often in a bad sense, but sometimes with a perfectly good meaning such as “think about” or “consider.” We see this in Proverbs 31:16 which tells us that the virtuous woman “considers a field and buys it.” So *mezimmah* itself means a plan which can be good (Proverbs 1:4; 2:11; 3:21; etc.) or bad (Proverbs 12:2; 14:17; 24:8; etc.). The word does not simply refer to abstract goals, but to actions that are based on careful thought. As such, we can say that in many cases discretion is “applied wisdom,” which is why Proverbs tells us that:

Discretion will protect you,
and understanding will guard you. (Proverbs 2:11)

Interestingly, this verse comes at the end of a passage that instructs us: “if you incline your ear to wisdom” (Proverbs 2:1, 4 BSB) then continues to the desired outcome or application of wisdom – discretion.

We can also say that discretion is the *effective* use of wisdom. Management expert Peter Drucker wrote in his book *The Effective Executive* that too often in their work and lives, people focus on efficiency (doing things right) instead of on effectiveness (doing the right thing). As Drucker put it: “Working on the right things is what makes ... work effective.” In the same way, from the perspective of Proverbs, discretion is what makes wisdom effective.

But discretion, like wisdom, must be learned – and it must also be *maintained*, as Proverbs also makes clear:

do not let wisdom and understanding out of your sight,
preserve sound judgment and discretion. (Proverbs 3:21)

that you may *maintain* discretion
and your lips may preserve knowledge. (Proverbs 5:2)

A person's discretion, like their reputation, is of little value if it is not maintained, and discretion is often the cause and reason for a good reputation. Conversely, as Proverbs so colorfully states:

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout
is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion. (Proverbs 11:22)

Of course, the same could be said of a man, but the proverb uses a woman in its analogy to heighten the contrast between beauty and the ugliness of a reputation of indiscretion.

Prudence

Now that we have looked at the word usually translated discretion, we can turn to the word that is frequently translated "prudence," but which essentially means the same thing.

The Hebrew word *ormah* – like *mezimmah* or discretion – has both positive and negative meanings. It can mean "craftiness" in a bad sense, but "prudence" or "discretion" in the good sense. In Proverbs its use is mainly positive (Proverbs 1:4; 8:5, 12; etc.). The related adjective *arum*, "crafty" or "prudent," is also frequently used in the same two ways but usually in a positive sense in Proverbs (Proverbs 12:16, 23; 13:16; etc.).

As we saw above, like discretion, prudence is mentioned at the very outset of Proverbs as one of the reasons for the book (Proverbs 1:4); the personification of wisdom is said to dwell with prudence as well as discretion (Proverbs 8:12); and both discretion and prudence/prudent are used throughout the book to stress right as opposed to wrong thinking:

A person is praised according to their prudence,
and one with a warped mind is despised. (Proverbs 12:8)

The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways.
(Proverbs 14:8)

Prudence is not just right thought, however – like discretion it is also the *application* of wisdom:

for receiving instruction in prudent behavior,
doing what is right and just and fair. (Proverbs 1:3)

There are many instances of this in Proverbs. For example:

He who gathers crops in summer is a prudent son,
but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son.
(Proverbs 10:5)

In the same way, prudence often has a forward-looking strategic aspect:

The prudent see danger and take refuge,
but the simple keep going and pay the penalty. (Proverbs 27:12)

Prudence – again like discretion – also involves careful planning such as wise stewardship, and may also connote discretion in the way things are handled. The word could often be translated “discreet” in such cases:

A prudent servant will rule over a disgraceful son. (Proverbs 17:2)

a prudent wife is from the Lord. (Proverbs 19:14)

A final aspect of prudence is the *restraint* that it brings to many everyday situations:

The prudent keep their knowledge to themselves,
but a fool’s heart blurts out folly. (Proverbs 12:23)

Sin is not ended by multiplying words,
but the prudent hold their tongues. (Proverbs 10:19)

So prudence is often a close synonym for discretion, and it may be helpful to translate prudence as discretion in our own minds as we read Proverbs. Both involve careful discernment and planning, the wise management of resources and opportunities, the avoidance of impulsive and rash behavior or speech, and the use of tact and wisdom in relationships with other people. These are all key areas in the expression of wisdom. They show why Proverbs 16:22 tells us “Prudence is a fountain of life to the prudent,” and why discretion is such an important concept within the book of Proverbs.

5. THE MEANING OF KINDNESS

What is the most important word in the Old Testament? Apart from the name of God, of course, it could certainly be argued that the most important single term is the Hebrew word *hesed*. Significantly, we find this word twice in the description God gives of himself: “The ... compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love [*hesed*] and faithfulness, maintaining love [*hesed*] to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Exodus 34:6). The term also appears in many scriptures where God is described by others: “Know therefore that ... he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love [*hesed*] to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments” (Deuteronomy 7:9).

Hesed is not only part of the nature of God – perhaps the most important aspect (compare “love” in the New Testament, 1 John 4:8) – but it is also the basis of God’s covenant relationship with human beings. We see this in the covenant made at Sinai – as Deuteronomy 7:9 shows – and we see it in the future, promised, covenant: “In that day I will make a covenant for them ... I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love [*hesed*] and compassion” (Hosea 2:18-19). Isaiah shows this word is the basis of the covenant that God offers to make with each one of us: “Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love [*hesed*] promised to David” (Isaiah 55:3). Time and again the Old Testament pairs God’s *hesed* with the word *covenant* (Deuteronomy 7:12; 1 Kings 8:23; Nehemiah 1:5; etc.) and summarizes his dealings with us in this combination of words. As we will see, the Bible also shows that just as *hesed* is the basis of God’s relationship with us, we should make it the basis of our relationship with others.

In the verses we looked at above regarding descriptions of God (Exodus 34:6 and Deuteronomy 7:9) the word *hesed* is translated “love” in the NIV, but in many other verses the NIV translates the word as “kindness,” while older translations such as the KJV often translated the word as “mercy.” *Hesed* appears almost 250 times in the Old Testament and there are many instances where the word is translated in other ways – as compassion, goodness, grace, loyalty, righteousness, steadfastness, faithfulness, and other terms.

So how are we to best understand this word that God uses to describe himself and which plays such an important role in the Old Testament? As many biblical scholars have come to realize, it is almost impossible to translate the fullness of *hesed* with just one word. That is why the translators of the RSV, for example, decided to use two words: “steadfast love,” and an even better translation in many cases is “loving kindness.” But if we have to limit ourselves to one word, a great many scholars would agree that “kindness” is probably the best choice.

The understanding of *hesed* as kindness or loving kindness is based on the fact that the word does not in any way suggest an abstract feeling toward others – as the word love by itself often does. *Hesed* always connotes an action on the part of the person expressing it. So while we can love someone or something without doing anything about it, we cannot be kind to someone without acting kindly toward them. That is why the Hebrew Bible often talks about individuals “doing” or “showing” *hesed*, and the concrete aspect of the word is especially evident when it is used in the plural as God's “mercies,” or “kindnesses.” This is also why some Bibles translate the word *hesed* as “deeds of devotion,” “good deeds,” or “loyal deeds.”

This background helps us understand the underlying meaning of the many instances of *hesed* that occur in the book. Always practical, Proverbs usually uses the word to stress active, actual love or kindness. We might say that *hesed* is *applied* love or loving kindness, and Proverbs shows us how we can apply it in our lives.

Throughout the Old Testament, *hesed* is not just used of God's actions toward people (Exodus 34:7; etc.), but also for the actions of people toward each other (Genesis 21:23; etc.) and to God (Jeremiah 2:2; etc.). Consider how these multiple dimensions of *hesed* appear in Proverbs:

God's kindness to humanity –

Through *love* and faithfulness sin is atoned for;
through the fear of the LORD evil is avoided. (Proverbs 16:6)

Human kindness to others –

Whoever is *kind* to the poor lends to the LORD,
and he will reward them for what they have done. (Proverbs 19:17)

Human love to God –

Whoever pursues righteousness and *love*
finds life, prosperity and honor. (Proverbs 21:21)

But although we see both the “vertical” (between God and people) and “horizontal” (between people) expressions of love and kindness in Proverbs, the book deals mainly with interpersonal kindness, as we might expect. Several aspects of the quality of *hesed* – and some of its related words – are made clear in Proverbs, and it can be helpful to consider them. We will look at a few examples here.

First, Proverbs shows us that the proper expression of kindness is deeper than our doing what is expected as a matter of duty, responsibility or social expectations. We must remember that ultimately kindness is based on sincerity:

What is desired in a man is kindness,
And a poor man is better than a liar. (Proverbs 19:22 NKJV)

The proper expression of kindness is wider than just being kind to those we know:

It is a sin to despise one's neighbor,
but blessed is the one who is kind to the needy. (Proverbs 14:21)

Kindness can, and should be applied to animals, also:

The righteous care for the needs of their animals,
but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel. (Proverbs 12:10)

Kindness is ongoing, and Proverbs rejects love that is not based on loyalty and dedication:

Many claim to have unfailing love,
but a faithful person who can find? (Proverbs 20:6)

In fact – as we will see in greater detail in the next chapter – loving kindness is often linked with the quality of faithfulness:

Let love and faithfulness never leave you;
bind them around your neck,
write them on the tablet of your heart. (Proverbs 3:3)

Many other aspects of loving kindness can be seen in Proverbs, but the root of the concept is that loving kindness is based on a family-like relationship that we extend to others and is not based on what is deserved or earned by the recipient. In fact, acts of kindness are always performed freely, without any expectation of return.

As such, the human expression of loving kindness is to be no different from the *hesed* that God shows to humans. And just as God himself is shown as “abounding in” or “filled with” loving kindness, Proverbs makes it clear we need to abound in that same kindness in every aspect of our lives. These principles are both encouraging and profitable to meditate on. As the book of Psalms urges: “Let the one who is wise heed these things and ponder the loving deeds [*hesed*] of the LORD” (Psalm 107:43).

6. FOLLOWING FAITHFULNESS

The word “faithfulness” may sound somewhat old-fashioned to our modern ears, but the concept behind this word lies at the heart of much of the wisdom found in the book of Proverbs. Before we look at this important concept in Proverbs, however, we need to learn a little about its underlying meaning.

The Hebrew word *emet* that is often translated as faithfulness in English Bibles is interesting because it has several meanings, the main ones being “reliability,” “faithfulness,” and “truth.” Older Bible translations such as the KJV often translated *emet* as truth in almost all cases, while most newer translations realize that faithfulness is often a more accurate rendering. As a result, although the NKJV (and other KJV-based versions) translates Proverbs 3:3 as “Let not mercy and truth forsake you,” the NIV translates this same verse as “Let love and faithfulness never leave you.”

In most cases, context makes the particular meaning of *emet* clear when the word is used. But keep in mind that while this word does sometimes carry the connotation of truth (for example, see Proverbs 12:19), it is more often used in the sense of reliability, trustworthiness, and faithfulness (Nehemiah 7:2; etc.). This means that if you are using an older translation such as the KJV (and even some modern ones) when studying the book of Proverbs, you frequently need to change the word “truth” to “faithfulness” in your own mind to better understand what the proverbs are actually saying.

Another aspect of this word that can help us better understand its use is that *emet* almost always has to do with *relationships* rather than *ideas*. In other words, even when the word is used with the meaning of truth, it usually means telling the truth rather than conceptual truth that we learn. Understanding these simple principles can make a significant difference in our study.

Now that we have this background, we can better appreciate the message of many of the proverbs. Going back to our example of Proverbs 3:3, we see why “Let love and faithfulness never leave you” is a better translation than “Let not mercy and truth forsake you,” because the words love or loving kindness and faithfulness better convey the active expression of these qualities in our relationships with others.

Faithfulness certainly is vital to our relationships. There are few things in life that can seem more personally devastating than being betrayed. If you have ever experienced betrayal by a spouse or close friend, or even a business colleague or acquaintance, you know the importance of loyalty and faithfulness. Countless relationships between individuals, communities, and even whole countries have been shattered through unfaithfulness. That is one of the reasons Proverbs puts so much stress on the concept – faithfulness is needed for the smooth functioning of just about all relationships. When we realize that, we understand why Proverbs says so firmly that:

The faithless will be fully repaid for their ways,
and the good rewarded for theirs. (Proverbs 14:14)

It is also why Proverbs gives us examples of faithfulness, or the lack of it, from many areas of life that we might not always think about in this context. For example:

A faithful person will be richly blessed,
but one eager to get rich will not go unpunished. (Proverbs 28:20)

At first glance this proverb might seem to be referring to two different things – faithfulness and avarice – but it is not. It tells us that those who are overly focused on getting money, or not losing it, are very likely to become unfaithful in their behavior because of this attitude. This single principle is one that can affect individuals in dozens of ways – from cheating on taxes to not paying those who are hired enough, or soon enough:

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,
when it is in your power to act. (Proverbs 3:27)

When we realize that faithfulness is involved in every situation where we have opportunity to do good, we realize just how broad its application is. Examples like the ones we have looked at show us why it is so important to think through the possible applications of proverbs as we study them. In doing this we may find small ways in which we can become more faithful in our lives in areas we would not otherwise have thought about. But we should remember that even if the issues seem small, they are still

important. Just as we find in the words of Jesus – given, incidentally, in the form of a proverb:

Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. (Luke 16:10)

There are many other reasons why faithfulness is stressed in so many proverbs. The book of Proverbs recognizes, for example, that our faithful behavior encourages a mirror-like response from others. For example, many modern studies have found that couples who doubt their mate's faithfulness are far more likely to be unfaithful themselves, while those who see even small indications of a spouse's loyalty to them are far more likely to be faithful in return. Proverbs uses an ancient but still viable example of just this principle of reciprocal faithfulness:

Love and faithfulness keep a king safe;
through love his throne is made secure. (Proverbs 20:28)

This proverb is simply stating that the love and faithfulness a king displays in dealing with his subjects elicits the same responses from them, and that this fact safeguards the king and the stability of his rule. But whether we are in a leadership role or not, the principle of faithfulness applies to us all in countless ways. It is the principle that lies behind dozens of proverbs such as :

One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin,
but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.
(Proverbs 18:24)

Who doesn't want friends, spouses, relatives, and coworkers who won't abandon us at the first sign of trouble or when we need their help? But that, of course, is how we have to be willing to live, also. Faithfulness to our beliefs, our relationships, and the commitments we make in life means steadfastly honoring them – even when it is difficult to do so. When we live in this way, Proverbs shows that we become known as being honest, dependable, and trustworthy. Faithfulness is just as much a part of being a Christian light as it is a matter of walking in wisdom that will prove beneficial to us and to others.

Spiritual Depth: A Small Case Study

There are some important spiritual aspects of faithfulness that are touched upon in Proverbs. Consider this example:

Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for;
through the fear of the LORD evil is avoided. (Proverbs 16:6)

This proverb cannot mean that we can somehow atone for our own sins through further actions of love and faithfulness – we cannot “earn” spiritual forgiveness, of course, as the Scriptures make clear. Equally, it cannot mean that we can somehow atone for the sins of others by forgiving them through our love and faithfulness. We can forgive others what they may have done to us (Proverbs 10:12), but we cannot actually atone for their sins. So it is clear that the first half of this verse is speaking of the fact that it is through love and faithfulness – God’s covenant blessings of *hesed* and *emet* – that our sins are atoned for by God himself. The second half of the proverb shows that it is also our proper fear of God that allows us to avoid other sins and mistakes.

So God is involved in both aspects of this process of being forgiven and being transformed in regard to sin and evil. In theological language this means that we are saved through God’s love and faithfulness and sanctified through our growing respect for him. This is more profound than we might realize. The Old Testament generally taught that forgiveness was through sacrifices, but this proverb foreshadows the New Testament message of forgiveness based not on sacrifice, but on repentance (in the second half of the proverb) and God’s grace (in the proverb’s first half). Repentant turning from sin is not the purchase price of the forgiveness God gives, but the seal or result of the forgiveness God has freely given.

This may seem like a lot of theology to pull from a single small proverb, but biblical scholars are virtually unanimous in understanding this verse to be one of true depth regarding God’s intent and desire regarding forgiveness – a concept that we also see flashes of (though never more succinctly) in the Psalms (Psalm 51:7; etc.) and the prophets (Ezekiel 18:27-28; Micah 6:6-8; etc.). So, the idea is not unique to Proverbs 16:6, but that scripture is a very clear example of the fact that the book of Proverbs is *not* just about human wisdom!

7. THE POWER OF SPEECH

Speech is one of the most frequently found topics in the book of Proverbs, and a great many verses in the book focus on how what we say can result in good or evil. Why is speech so important in Proverbs? Remember that earlier in this book we saw the value Proverbs places on the fear of God as the basis for wise living, and we also saw how one of the definitions Proverbs gives of godly fear is hatred of evil thoughts, actions, and words (Proverbs 8:13). In this chapter we will look at what Proverbs has to say about the evils of misused speech – characterized as the words of the “unwise” or “fool,” and what it says are the words of the wise – words guided by wisdom and godly fear. We will look at a dozen examples of each type of speech.

The Words of the Unwise

Almost half of the things the book of Proverbs states are “abominations” to God or that God hates (for example, Proverbs 6:16-19) are related to speech. Perhaps not surprisingly, lying is among the most frequently condemned misuse of speech, but in addition to lying and exaggeration, Proverbs also gives a number of other characteristics of unwise speech that we need to avoid. The words of the unwise are said to be:

Untrue –

The LORD detests lying lips,
but he delights in people who are trustworthy. (Proverbs 12:22)

Hasty –

To answer before listening –
that is folly and shame. (Proverbs 18:13)

Continuous –

Sin is not ended by multiplying words,
but the prudent hold their tongues. (Proverbs 10:19)

Self-Destructive –

A fortune made by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor
and a deadly snare. (Proverbs 21:6)

Unrestrained –

Fools give full vent to their rage,
but the wise bring calm in the end. (Proverbs 29:11)

Opinionated –

Fools find no pleasure in understanding
but delight in airing their own opinions. (Proverbs 18:2)

Gossiping –

A perverse person stirs up conflict,
and a gossip separates close friends. (Proverbs 16:28)

Critical –

Whoever derides their neighbor has no sense,
... one who has understanding holds their tongue. (Proverbs 11:12)

Flattering –

Those who flatter their neighbors
are spreading nets for their feet. (Proverbs 29:5)

Slandering –

Whoever conceals hatred with lying lips
and spreads slander is a fool. (Proverbs 10:18)

Provocative –

A violent person entices their neighbor
and leads them down a path that is not good. (Proverbs 16:29)

Abusive –

The words of the reckless pierce like swords,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (Proverbs 12:18)

Many other aspects of unwise speech can be found in Proverbs, and the book also shows that passive participation in unwise speech can be just as problematic as speaking the words ourselves (Proverbs 17:4; etc.). If we are honest, we may find reflections of ourselves in some of these negative qualities, and that can make study and meditation on what Proverbs tells us about these patterns of behavior all the more worthwhile in terms of

self-understanding and growth – as well as in helping us to avoid the results of unwise speech (Proverbs 18:7)!

The Words of the Wise

Proverbs also gives us many examples of wise speech that we can remind ourselves to cultivate. The book tells us that the words of the wise are:

Protective –

Those who guard their lips preserve their lives,
but those who speak rashly will come to ruin. (Proverbs13:3)

Healing –

Gracious words are a honeycomb,
sweet to the soul and healing to the bones. (Proverbs16:24)

Honored –

Kings take pleasure in honest lips;
they value the one who speaks what is right. (Proverbs 16:13)

Encouraging –

Anxiety weighs down the heart,
but a kind word cheers it up. (Proverbs 12:25)

Restrained –

The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint
and whoever has understanding is even-tempered. (Proverbs 17:27)

Discreet –

The prudent keep their knowledge to themselves,
but a fool's heart blurts out folly. (Proverbs 12:23)

Trustworthy –

A gossip betrays a confidence,
but a trustworthy person keeps a secret. (Proverbs 11:13)

Instructive –

The hearts of the wise make their mouths prudent,
and their lips promote instruction. (Proverbs 16:23)

Persuasive –

Through patience a ruler can be persuaded,
and a gentle tongue can break a bone. (Proverbs 25:15)

Cautious –

The heart of the righteous weighs its answers,
but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil. (Proverbs 15:28)

Soothing –

The soothing tongue is a tree of life,
but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit. (Proverbs 15:4)

Uplifting –

A person finds joy in giving an apt reply –
and how good is a timely word! (Proverbs 15:23)

So Proverbs shows us that – whether we are looking at our own words and the effects they have on others, or the words of others to which we react – in literally dozens of ways human speech has the potential to either build up or pull down those who hear it. This alone is a good reason to read the book of Proverbs on a regular basis. We can all profit from the reminders Proverbs offers us in the area of speech – as well as the encouragement it gives that “From the fruit of their lips people are filled with good things” (Proverbs 12:14).

8. THE PATHS OF PEACE

Shalom – one of the most powerful words and concepts in the whole Bible! Although the Hebrew word for “peace” only appears a few times in Proverbs, the concept (like that of discretion, as we saw in Chapter 4) is found throughout the book. Before considering the importance of the concept of peace in Proverbs, however, we should look briefly at the biblical meaning of the word.

The concept of *shalom* means much more than simply a feeling of tranquility – it is actually a state of affairs. But *shalom* is not just the absence of war. In fact, the Bible even refers to the *shalom* of war when King David asked the warrior Uriah about the success of the military campaign in which he was engaged (2 Samuel 11:7). *Shalom* means welfare and prosperity on the one hand and the absence of problems or discord on the other. The word is also used in the Bible to speak of completeness, fullness, harmony, health, order, perfection, prosperity, rest, safety, soundness, tranquility, welfare, and wholeness!

Given this rich range of meanings, it should not be surprising that peace is very much a part of the way of wisdom, and that Proverbs tells us of personified wisdom herself:

Her ways are pleasant ways,
and all her paths are peace. (Proverbs 3:17)

And we are told that the teachings of wisdom are of great value for gaining a long and peaceful life:

for they will prolong your life many years
and bring you peace and prosperity. (Proverbs 3:2)

In fact, when we consider the full range of meaning involved in the word *shalom*, we could even say that Proverbs is a handbook or guide to peace as much as anything else. Proverbs does not simply sing the praises of peace – it gives us specific counsel about things to avoid and things to do to help us achieve its blessings. We will look at just a few of these areas here: the two things Proverbs continually warns against as destroying peace, and two things it indicates we can do to achieve it.

Anger

Sadly, we live in an age of unrestrained anger. Each day brings news stories of uncontrolled and unleashed anger in the home, in the workplace, and in incidents of “road rage,” “airline rage,” and other forms of violent anger. From “blowups” to “meltdowns,” the expression of anger has become so common that it is almost an accepted fact of life. But Proverbs categorically rejects the “natural expression of emotion” that has produced much of this open anger and its horrible results:

An angry person stirs up conflict,
and a hot-tempered person commits many sins. (Proverbs 29:22)

This condemnation of uncontrolled angry *behavior* (as opposed to controlled angry *thoughts* that anyone can experience) is repeated in various ways throughout the book of Proverbs (Proverbs 14:17; etc.). And Proverbs also repeatedly contrasts such behavior with the wisdom of patience in these situations. It first shows the need for patience to be able to slow down our own natural tendency to anger:

Whoever is patient has great understanding,
but one who is quick-tempered displays folly. (Proverbs 14:29)

Proverbs also stresses our need for patience in dealing with the anger of others:

A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict,
but the one who is patient calms a quarrel. (Proverbs 15:18)

When we ourselves are the ones who need to be calmed, wisdom encourages us to ask ourselves if our anger is really justified, if our anger is really in proportion to the problem we are angry about, and if we are truly controlling our anger, or if our anger is controlling us.

When the anger is on the part of others, Proverbs encourages us with the fact that:

A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger. (Proverbs 15:1)

Choosing to follow wisdom in these situations almost always determines their outcome.

Pride

Proverbs also makes it clear that peace is often lost through pride as well as through anger. In fact, a great deal of anger is often rooted in pride:

A fool's mouth lashes out with pride,
but the lips of the wise protect them. (Proverbs 14:3)

Where there is strife, there is pride,
but wisdom is found in those who take advice. (Proverbs 13:10)

Why is strife linked to taking advice in this proverb? Simply because pride is the underlying problem that is manifested in symptoms such as not being willing to accept or heed advice, and pride – sooner or later – leads to strife and the loss of peace. Once again, however, Proverbs shows a better response, especially when what is said by others is clearly not for our benefit or is even insulting:

Fools show their annoyance at once,
but the prudent overlook an insult. (Proverbs 12:16)

The prudent individual is shrewd and discreet enough that even under provocation he or she maintains composure, shrugs off the embarrassment, and averts further conflict. If we want peace in our lives, Proverbs tells us, we must be willing to focus on de-escalation when we have to deal with anger or pride in our interpersonal interactions.

Avoidance of Strife

In addition to the principle of de-escalation when problems occur, Proverbs teaches the avoidance of the problems in the first place, whenever this is possible. A great many proverbs speak to this simple but so often unfollowed strategy:

Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person,

do not associate with one easily angered. (Proverbs 22:24)

Better a dry crust with peace and quiet
than a house full of feasting, with strife. (Proverbs 17:1)

Discipline your children, and they will give you peace;
they will bring you the delights you desire. (Proverbs 29:17)

If a wise person goes to court with a fool,
the fool rages and scoffs, and there is no peace. (Proverbs 29:9)

These are just some of the examples Proverbs gives us of situations where we can avoid the loss of peace in our lives through preemptive action.

Right Living

A final – and tremendously encouraging – aspect of peace that Proverbs teaches us is the simple truth that although the righteous may suffer just like anyone else, a good life leads to both the kind of peace that is tranquility and the peace which is freedom from outward strife:

A heart at peace gives life to the body,
but envy rots the bones. (Proverbs 14:30)

When the Lord takes pleasure in anyone's way,
he causes their enemies to make peace with them. (Proverbs 16:7)

Ultimately, peace is one of the greatest facilitators of human happiness, and while we all desire happiness, we are all prone at times to forget that thoughts, words, and actions that decrease peace decrease the happiness we want. But Proverbs' wisdom is timeless when it reminds us that: "those who promote peace have joy" (Proverbs 12:20).

9. THE SEARCH FOR SECURITY

We all appreciate security, peace, and safety in life, but those of us who have these things may often take them for granted. Many people in the world in which we live do not have any ongoing sense of security, of course, and in the ancient world concern for security in life was widespread and greater than we may realize. This fact is clearly reflected in the book of Proverbs, which deals with matters of security more frequently than we might guess.

If we do a word search for “security” or “safety” within the book, we only find one or two instances of these words – but if we widen our viewpoint, we find that dozens of proverbs actually focus on specific aspects of security. We find, in fact, that Proverbs treats this quality as one of the greatest blessings of life and shows deep awareness of the painfulness of its absence.

Specifically, Proverbs shows four things that are helpful, but of limited value in finding safety in life. The book also repeatedly speaks of another source of security that is worth more than all the others. We will look at all these areas in turn.

Wealth

Proverbs is very clear that physical wealth can be a great help in preserving our security in life. Just as today those who are blessed with material wealth can live in safe and even protected communities, so in biblical times the rich could afford strong homes and servants to protect them:

The wealth of the rich is their fortified city,
but poverty is the ruin of the poor. (Proverbs 10:15)

This thought is repeated in another proverb, but notice the hint of uncertainty that enters this one:

The wealth of the rich is their fortified city;
they imagine it a wall too high to scale. (Proverbs 18:11)

Proverbs understands that wealth may often help provide safety, but it is not certain to do so:

Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath,
but righteousness delivers from death. (Proverbs 11:4)

Those who trust in their riches will fall,
but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf. (Proverbs 11:28)

The limited ability of wealth to protect us is one of the many reasons Proverbs tells us:

Do not wear yourself out to get rich ...
Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone,
for they will surely sprout wings
and fly off to the sky like an eagle. (Proverbs 23:4-5)

Strength

Proverbs tells us that “The glory of young men is their strength” (Proverbs 20:29), and that the “Proverbs 31” woman is no different:

She is clothed with strength and dignity;
she can laugh at the days to come. (Proverbs 31:25)

Indeed, strength is a valuable commodity, and Proverbs counsels us that:

If you falter in a time of trouble,
how small is your strength! (Proverbs 24:10)

The wise prevail through great power,
and those who have knowledge muster their strength.
(Proverbs 24:5)

But youth and strength do not last forever, and there are all too many cases where even the young and strong do not find security. Strength, like wealth, can only help us to a degree, and there are circumstances where even the very strong are overthrown:

One who is wise can go up against the city of the mighty
and pull down the stronghold in which they trust. (Proverbs 21:22)

Friendship

Proverbs also shows that friendship, like close family, can be a hedge
against the uncertainties of difficult times:

A friend loves at all times,
and a brother is born for a time of adversity. (Proverbs 17:17)

However, many proverbs acknowledge that friendship, like wealth and
strength, cannot always be counted on:

Wealth attracts many friends,
but even the closest friend of the poor person deserts them.
(Proverbs 19:4)

This is why Proverbs urges us to remain loyal to our friends and stresses
that friendship is only as good as it is lasting:

Do not forsake your friend or a friend of your family,
and do not go to your relative's house when disaster strikes you—
better a neighbor nearby than a relative far away. (Proverbs 27:10)

For Proverbs, helping others in difficult times and situations is a moral
responsibility:

Rescue those being led away to death;
hold back those staggering toward slaughter.
If you say, "But we knew nothing about this,"
does not he who weighs the heart perceive it?
Does not he who guards your life know it?
Will he not repay everyone according to what they have done?
(Proverbs 24:11-12)

This is one of Proverbs' most powerful arguments for showing loyalty and
support to those in need, but the very wording of the admonition shows
there are many times when people do not exhibit these qualities.

Wisdom

The value of wisdom in terms of security is hinted at in some of the proverbs we have looked at already, but many more make the point explicitly:

Those who trust in themselves are fools,
but those who walk in wisdom are kept safe. (Proverbs 28:26)

The prudent see danger and take refuge,
but the simple keep going and pay the penalty. (Proverbs 22:3)

Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you;
love her, and she will watch over you. (Proverbs 4:6)

but whoever listens to [wisdom] will live in safety
and be at ease, without fear of harm. (Proverbs 1:33)

Wisdom certainly can and does protect those who apply it. Nevertheless, this is true only to a certain point. There are times when even our best and most careful planning – even wisdom itself – is not enough to protect us from the fact that time and chance happen to everyone (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

In all these areas – wealth, strength, friendship, and wisdom – we have qualities that can help protect us in matters of security, but many proverbs make it clear in each case that the security gained is limited and not perfect. It is easy to mistake what these proverbs say for pessimism – that human life is doomed to the ravages of insecurity. But such proverbs are really pointing us to a larger fact – that our relationship with God is the only source of true security.

Fearing and Trusting God

The unspoken context of even the most pessimistic-seeming proverbs is that we cannot find true security in physical things. But righteousness, fearing and trusting in God – all parts of the final quality we must consider – alone protect us to the full:

The wise fear the LORD and shun evil,
but a fool is hotheaded and yet feels secure. (Proverbs 14:16)

Whoever fears the LORD has a secure fortress,
and for their children it will be a refuge. (Proverbs 14:26)

Fear of man will prove to be a snare,
but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe. (Proverbs 29:25)

he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,
for he guards the course of the just
and protects the way of his faithful ones. (Proverbs 2:7-8)

Unlike the other qualities we considered first, there are no proverbs giving downsides or limitations to the fear of God and trust in God – there is no “the fear of the LORD brings security up to a point”! Even though God does sometimes allow things to happen to his people (once again, as Ecclesiastes reminds us – good and bad happen to all) in everyday normal life – which is the perspective maintained throughout Proverbs – time and again we are assured that true security in this life and ultimate security of the life beyond this life is found in righteousness based on the trust and proper fear of God.

10. A TREE OF LIFE

There are few more important concepts in the book of Proverbs than that of life. The words “life” and “live” appear over fifty times in the book – more times than any of the other words and concepts we have looked at in the previous chapters. But if we are to understand the many instances in which this theme appears, we must ask what exactly is “life” from the perspective of the wisdom literature of which Proverbs is a part? The answer is found in a number of the metaphors Proverbs uses for life, and we will look at several of them here – beginning with a particularly interesting verse in Proverbs 3 regarding the personification of wisdom:

She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her;
those who hold her fast will be blessed. (Proverbs 3:18)

In this proverb we see that wisdom, already personified as a woman, now metaphorically becomes a tree of life! This analogy doubtless made the proverb’s original hearers – as it does us today – think back to the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden. In that story, humans were given the opportunity to seek God’s blessings – characterized as the tree of life – but chose instead to take from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil with its resultant curses.

Proverbs is the only other book in the Old Testament that mentions a “tree of life,” but “*the* tree” of life of Genesis is clearly not exactly the same as “a tree” of life that is found in several instances in Proverbs. While “the” tree of Genesis is described as a singular tree that gave eternal life, Proverbs speaks of wisdom and certain other things that are “a tree of life” – as we see, for example, regarding fulfilled hope and calming speech:

Hope deferred makes the heart sick,
but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life. (Proverbs 13:12)

The soothing tongue is a tree of life,
but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit. (Proverbs 15:4)

It is clear in these scriptures that the life being discussed is not eternal life. Proverbs also speaks of other things as sources of life – for example, righteous words as a fountain of life:

The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life,
but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence. (Proverbs 10:11)

Here, and in other proverbs where a fountain of life is equated with the teaching of the wise (Proverbs 13:14), with the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 14:27), and with prudence (Proverbs 16:22), we see once again that the life that comes from wisdom spoken of in Proverbs is associated with physical rather than spiritual life. It is abundant life that extends or improves our physical lives. We see this in many proverbs, such as the following examples regarding the teachings of wisdom:

for they will prolong your life many years
and bring you peace and prosperity. (Proverbs 3:2)

for they are life to those who find them
and health to one's whole body. (Proverbs 4:22)

For through wisdom your days will be many,
and years will be added to your life. (Proverbs 9:11)

Nevertheless, although the concept of life in Proverbs is usually one of full and abundant physical life, a number of proverbs seem to look beyond the physical to the concept of a more lasting life. Some proverbs seem to hint at that life:

Truly the righteous attain life,
but whoever pursues evil finds death. (Proverbs 11:19)

Other proverbs appear to make the connection more explicitly:

In the way of righteousness there is life;
along that path is immortality. (Proverbs 12:28)

We must also consider the fact that Proverbs frequently speaks of death – as the opposite of the way of wisdom and life. This is nowhere clearer than in Proverbs' characterization, in its opening chapters, of the wayward and adulterous woman who is a symbol of death itself.

There is nothing misogynistic about the book's use of this analogy. Proverbs personifies wisdom as a woman, as we have seen. Proverbs 1:8 tells us, "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching," and we have a whole section of Proverbs that consists entirely of the instructions for a king given by his mother (Proverbs 31:1-9) and praise for a virtuous woman (Proverbs 31:10-31). But the adulteress is used repeatedly to contrast her way of folly and death with the way of wisdom and life:

Surely her house leads down to death
and her paths to the spirits of the dead. (Proverbs 2:18)

Her feet go down to death;
her steps lead straight to the grave. (Proverbs 5:5)

Her house is a highway to the grave,
leading down to the chambers of death. (Proverbs 7:27)

That is why Proverbs insists that a relationship with "another man's wife preys on your very life" (Proverbs 6:26). It is not that adultery is the only deadly sin we are warned against in Proverbs, of course, it is that the adulterous woman is presented as the characterization of all that is wrong and that leads to death.

Just as the book of Proverbs begins in its introductory chapters with the adulterous woman who typifies the way of death, it ends with the virtuous woman in the book's final chapter who typifies the way of life. It is no coincidence that – unlike the adulterous woman who cannot be trusted and who destroys the lives of others – we are told of the virtuous woman that:

Her husband can trust her,
and she will greatly enrich his life. (Proverbs 31:11 NLT)

But in reading the detailed description of the virtuous woman, it might seem that she is an impossibly talented, successful, and perfect role model – and that is because she really is. The virtuous woman is the personification of a life perfectly lived out in wisdom, as we see in the fact that the term used of her is not used to describe any of even the most outstanding women of the Bible – except for Ruth, of whom the term is

used as a compliment rather than a biblical assessment (Ruth 3:11). The virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 is a more flesh and blood example of the personification of wisdom (Proverbs 31:26), but she is still, ultimately, a personification of wisdom applied in life.

Proverbs portrays the adulterous woman and the virtuous woman as it does because the book sees death as not just a physical, momentary event, but as both an ongoing state after we die, and a condition of life before we die – a way of living that continually produces fear, guilt, anxiety, and failure. In contrast, for Proverbs, life is not just what we have until we die, it is the quality of the life we have with security, peace of mind, happiness, and the hope of lasting life.

So perhaps it is not coincidental that on several occasions Proverbs uses the idea of a tree of life – a way of life that avoids the evils of living in death and reaps the blessings of living in life. It is in that sense that Proverbs tells us “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life” (Proverbs 11:30).

APPENDIX 1:

PROVERBS AS POETRY

While most modern proverbs consist of a simple statement such as “one good turn deserves another,” biblical proverbs followed the pattern of much ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature in that they usually expressed their ideas in two halves which are in some way parallel to each other. This is because the literary form of proverbs was really a kind of poetry. Near Eastern literature did not utilize the recurrent meter or rhymes we tend to think of as distinguishing poetry from prose writing; rather it utilized the parallelism of ideas. A number of kinds of such parallelism were used by the writers of Proverbs, but there are three main types.

1. Synonymous Parallelism. This is the most common form of parallelism found in the book of Proverbs. In this type of proverb, a second clause restates what is said in the first clause in order to express the same thought in a different way, to expand it or clarify it. This was a common method of stating teachings in the biblical world, and we see it, for example, in Jesus’ prayer in Matthew 6:13: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Here are three examples from Proverbs:

Wisdom shouts in the street,
she lifts her voice in the square. (Proverbs 1:20 BSB)

In the way of righteousness there is life;
along that path is immortality. (Proverbs 12:28)

A wicked person listens to deceitful lips;
a liar pays attention to a destructive tongue. (Proverbs 17:4)

2. Antithetic Parallelism. In this type of proverb, a truth which is stated in the first clause is reinforced in the second clause by means of contrast. Simply put, a truth is compared with a contrasting or opposite truth. The two halves are often combined by means of the word “but.” This does not mean that there is a contradiction, but that full understanding of an issue often has two sides:

Hatred stirs up conflict,
but love covers over all wrongs. (Proverbs 10:12)

The plans of the righteous are just,
but the advice of the wicked is deceitful. (Proverbs 12:5)

The light of the righteous shines brightly,
but the lamp of the wicked is snuffed out. (Proverbs 13:9)

3. Synthetic Parallelism. In these proverbs, the second clause develops the thought of the first by expanding it in some way. The two halves may be connected by words such as “for,” “like,” or “so.”

A king's wrath strikes terror like the roar of a lion;
those who anger him forfeit their lives. (Proverbs 20:2)

Above all else, guard your heart,
for everything you do flows from it. (Proverbs 4:23)

A beautiful woman who lacks discretion
is like a gold ring in a pig's snout. (Proverbs 11:22)

Although it isn't necessary to memorize the technical terms by which these types of proverbs are known – synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic – we do need to keep in mind the simple principle that biblical proverbs almost always consist of two halves which either mirror, contrast, or develop each other.

APPENDIX 2:

PROVERBS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The value of Proverbs can be seen in the degree to which Jesus and the apostles quote and echo this remarkable book – as many as thirty-five times according to some estimates. Jesus not only quoted the book directly, but as we will see, it appears to have connections to even some of his most profound teaching.

At times Jesus built his teaching directly around Proverbs – as we find in Luke 14:7-11 where, at the dinner in the Pharisee’s house, he reminded those present of Proverbs 25:6-7 which shows it is better to take the lower places of honor, and then to be invited to the head of the table.

Jesus seems to have also frequently used proverbs which, although not found in the book of Proverbs, were apparently in current use in his own day. Sayings such as “a tree is recognized by its fruit” (Matthew 12:33) and “If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit” (Matthew 15:14) may be typical of these folk proverbs.

But it is clear that Jesus used the proverb form extensively in communicating his message. The root of the Hebrew word for proverb, *mashal*, means “to be like,” and the word can cover short proverb-like comparisons and sayings on up to extended parables. When Jesus taught “the kingdom of heaven is like...”, he was using the extended proverb format. We even find important examples of Jesus’ use of Proverbs in one of the most spiritual of his teachings – the Sermon on the Mount.

The Proverbs on the Mount

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus quotes from or alludes to Proverbs numerous times. For example, we can see the reflection of the proverb “those who seek me find me” (Proverbs 8:17) in his words “seek and you will find” and “the one who seeks finds” (Matthew 7:7-8). But the connections are more than incidental. When we look at the Beatitudes, the most famous part of the Sermon on the Mount, we find the Beatitudes are given in a format found in Proverbs – as we saw in the Introduction to this book. We also find a remarkable *inverse* similarity to what

Proverbs 6 tells us about the seven things God hates and a number of the Beatitudes themselves:

| God Hates – Proverbs 6:16-19 | The Beatitudes – Matthew 5:3-12 |
|--|--|
| A proud look | The meek |
| A lying tongue | Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness |
| Hands that shed innocent blood | Those who mourn |
| A heart that devises wicked schemes | The pure in heart |
| Feet that are quick to rush into evil | The poor in spirit |
| A false witness | The merciful |
| A person who stirs up conflict | The peacemakers |

This comparison does not include the final, eighth, beatitude “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness” (vs. 10) because only the first seven beatitudes, like the seven evils mentioned in Proverbs 6, are actual characteristics of a person. And although the Beatitudes cover many of the same ideas found in Proverbs 6:16-19 in a positive manner, we should remember that it was often typical of Jesus’ teaching to recast “negatively” worded concepts in a positive manner (Matthew 22:35-40; etc.). We should also not forget that Jesus compared himself to Solomon and stressed that his own God-given wisdom was greater (Matthew 12:42).

Wisdom certainly figures prominently in Jesus’ mountainside sermon, and he ends it by telling his hearers that: “everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man” (Matthew 7:24). In the minds of Jesus’ listeners, such a “wise man” would have been no different from the individual held up as an example of right and godly living throughout the book of Proverbs.

This comparison is not to lower the Sermon on the Mount to the level of “human wisdom” or to elevate Proverbs to the level of Jesus’ highest teaching. It simply stresses that Proverbs contains ideas that were clearly part of the scriptural background and thinking of Jesus – ideas that are certainly worthy of our attention and are often deeper than we may realize.

The Influence of Wisdom

There are many other instances of the influence of Proverbs in the New Testament where its material is often quoted directly. For example, the apostle Paul uses Proverbs 25:21-22 in Romans 12:20; the author of Hebrews uses Proverbs 3:11-12 in Hebrews 12:5-6; and the apostle Peter uses Proverbs 3:34 in 1 Peter 5:5; Proverbs 11:31 in 1 Peter 4:18; and Proverbs 26:11 in 2 Peter 2:22.

As we might expect, we especially find reflections of Proverbs in the New Testament's own "Book of Wisdom" – the epistle of James. James begins his letter by stating "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God" (James 1:5), and his stress on wisdom is clear when he tells us: "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom" (James 3:13).

So, when the apostle tells us that "the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17), we might see that he is giving us seven qualities of wisdom ("full of mercy and good fruit" is a combined quality, as the NIV translation shows) in the same manner as the seven pillars of wisdom mentioned in Proverbs 9:1. This famous verse looks back to the seven things mentioned in Proverbs 8:12-14. The specific qualities listed are quite different in Proverbs and James, but the similar stress on wisdom and its seven or "complete" characteristics doubtless show yet another influence of Proverbs on the apostle's writing.

The important thing for us to remember is that the book of Proverbs was the central book of wisdom in the Hebrew Scriptures, and whenever the New Testament writers mention wisdom or its attributes, they do so from a perspective in which Proverbs was their own – and their readers' – frame of reference.

APPENDIX 3:

READING THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

Studying the book of Proverbs is no more difficult than studying any other biblical book, but there are a few things that we can remember, and some that we can do, to help us get the most from our reading. Here are five basic principles to keep in mind, and five equally basic tips to utilize in studying Proverbs.

Five Principles for Understanding Proverbs

Every proverb has its own perspective. One of the first things we must do in reading any biblical proverb is to think about its original meaning as opposed to our modern perceptions. When we read in Proverbs “A gift given in secret soothes anger, and a bribe concealed in the cloak pacifies great wrath” (Proverbs 21:14), we must realize that a small number of such proverbs are written from the perspective of how the world works – they are not condoning or advising the action any more than the proverb that tells us “A sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth” (Proverbs 26:15).

Proverbs must be seen in context. As we read through Proverbs, we find a number that might seem to contradict each other, such as “Answer a fool according to his folly” (Proverbs 26:5) and “Do not answer a fool according to his folly” (Proverbs 26:4). The answer to these seeming contradictions is usually to be found in the same or surrounding verses, but sometimes it will lie in some other part of the book. Remembering the principle is important: proverbs have contexts just like any other part of Scripture and we may need to watch to see if an idea is expanded or clarified in some way elsewhere in the book.

A proverb is a principle, not a promise. It is often said that the proverbs are not guarantees of a certain outcome, but rather guides to the best chance for success. “Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it” (Proverbs 22:6) is wise child-rearing advice in most cases, but despite our best efforts, it is not a guarantee that our children will choose the right way.

Proverbs give general rules. This is an expansion of the last point. The statements found in Proverbs often describe average or usual circumstances and cannot be applied to every possible scenario or specific circumstance. Most proverbs are based on the way life operates ninety or even ninety-five percent of the time. The different types of situations found in the books of Job and Ecclesiastes complement rather than contradict Proverbs, which addresses more “normal life.” Additionally, not every proverb is going to seem applicable at all times in our lives.

Some proverbs must be balanced with opposites. Sometimes proverbs must also be balanced with seemingly very different ones. Compare “Like one who grabs a stray dog by the ears is someone who rushes into a quarrel not their own” (Proverbs 26:17) with “Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter” (Proverbs 24:11). Putting these scriptures together indicates that we should sometimes be sure to avoid trouble, but at other times we may need to meet it head on in order to help those who are truly in need.

Five Tips for Reading Proverbs

Resist the urge to read big chunks of Proverbs at one time. Although Proverbs may seem like easy reading compared to some of the long theological sections of the Bible, don’t be misled. Proverbs are the biblical equivalent of condensed soup – a little goes a long way! Proverbs are intentionally structured and worded to pack a maximum amount of meaning into a small space, so be sure to unpack each one carefully.

Focus on themes. As we mention above, many proverbs need to be seen in the context of others on the same subject or theme, or even balanced against apparent opposites. As we have done in this book, it is helpful to bring groups of proverbs together, but there are more themes in Proverbs than we can cover in one volume. You can utilize the search functions on many Bible websites to do word searches within Proverbs to bring many of the scriptures on a given topic together. Try searching “diligence/diligent,” “child/children,” “honest/honesty,” or any of a number of other themes.

Read a chapter a day for a month. Proverbs has its own built-in reading plan in the sense that there are thirty-one chapters in the book. Read one

chapter for each day of the month in order to get an overview of the book, to help you find themes you might want to research, or just for review. The overview can often be just as helpful as focused study on individual verses.

Use different translations. This is particularly important as the Hebrew of many proverbs is difficult, and it is often good to look at possible translation options before accepting and meditating on an assumed meaning. Using a combination of a good “word for word” translation like the ESV (English Standard Version) and a good “thought for thought” version like the NLT (New Living Translation) can often be more helpful than simply checking a number of translations of the same type.

Focus on application. Think about how to apply each proverb in your own life before moving on to the next. That is the difference between acquiring knowledge and developing wisdom – which is what Proverbs is ultimately all about. Proverbs tells us, in fact, that: “Like a thornbush in a drunkard’s hand is a proverb in the mouth of a fool” (Proverbs 26:9). This colorful saying makes the point that simply knowing and citing proverbs does not make us wise – it is as we think about, internalize, and utilize proverbs in our lives that we are guided by wisdom, and do become wise.

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