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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

WISDOM LITERATURE

UNIT 08: PROVERBS – 2

BIBLICAL READINGS:

Read the citations given from the book of Proverbs as you study the units on this book.

TEXTBOOK READINGS:

This unit will continue to utilize readings from the textbook: *Spotlight on the Proverbs*.

TYPES OF WISDOM:

A vital key to understanding the book of Proverbs is the realization that the work actually contains three distinct types of wisdom, originating from three separate sources. Knowing these sources and keeping them in mind helps us to approach individual proverbs correctly. The three types are as follows:

1. Folk wisdom. The traditional wisdom of the common people – both rural and urban – is recognized by its short, easy to understand statements giving principles drawn from everyday life. Frequently proverbs of this type make simple statements such as “A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son brings grief to his mother” (10:1) – like traditional sayings in English or other modern languages. Alternately, they often take the form of direct instruction such as that given by parents to their children. For example, “Do not wear yourself out to get rich; do not trust your own cleverness” (23:4). Such proverbs are easily memorized and understood and usually present no difficulty in our understanding of them. They require the least amount of thought to grasp and profit from their meaning, though thinking about their different possible applications can often be helpful.

2. Royal wisdom. This includes the sayings of kings and palace officials regarding the principles of rulership and the interaction of individuals and groups of people. Much of this wisdom clearly originated in royal courts, and most of it is of a practical, political, and diplomatic nature; for example “Do not exalt yourself in the king’s presence, and do not claim a place among his great men” (25:6). The word “king” appears over thirty times in Proverbs, and many of its sayings are directed at kings themselves. Proverbs chapters 25-29 contain most of the sayings of this type and are said to have been collected by the servants of King Hezekiah for that king’s use. But there are proverbs of this type scattered throughout the work, and the great poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge called Proverbs as a whole “the best statesman’s manual” ever written. Wisdom sayings of this category do not always take a physical perspective, however, as when we read “Many seek an audience with a ruler, but it is from the LORD that one gets justice” (29:26). Like folk wisdom, this kind of proverb is usually straightforward, but often deserves more reflection on its possible applications in areas of modern life such as business relationships and leadership responsibilities.

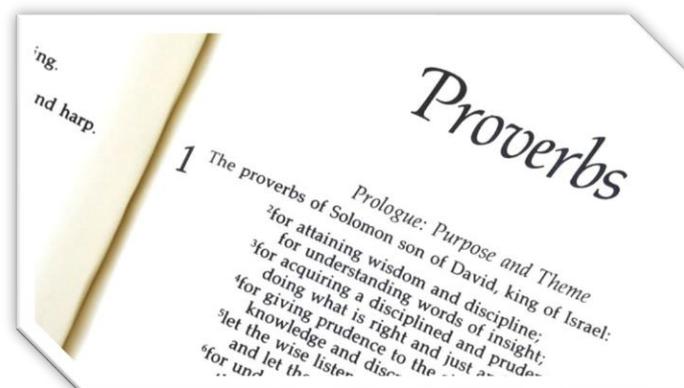
3. Instructional wisdom. The sayings of the professional teachers of wisdom make up the final category of Proverbs (22:17; etc.). As we saw earlier, the cultures of the ancient Near East had an important intellectual class that produced, collected, and taught wisdom principles; Solomon, the author of a great many of the biblical proverbs of this type, was such a teacher (Ecclesiastes 1:1). These proverbs are often distinctly different from those of the other two types we have looked at, as they frequently deal with spiritual matters, and also view life from a theological perspective rather than simple physical cause and effect. Both biblical proverbs and those of the wider Near East give advice regarding human relationship with God or the gods, and in the case of the Bible these are the most valuable of all its wisdom sayings. These are still proverbs, however, and are constructed to be memorable rather than to be theologically precise. Yet they sometimes pack far-reaching concepts into the space of a few words – as we will explore below. These proverbs often deserve much more attention in order to profit the most from them.

The importance of knowing and recognizing these different classes of wisdom sayings cannot be overemphasized. Students of Proverbs often become discouraged or disinterested because they spend much time wrestling with simple category 1 (folk wisdom) proverbs, trying to see more in them than is there. While all biblical proverbs are important and can teach valuable lessons, some simply deserve more thought and reflection than others. When we assess and keep the various categories of proverbs in mind, we can spend more time thinking about the sayings that give greater return for increased study and thought. To this end, some find it helpful to pencil a small numeral 3 next to category 3 proverbs in the margin of their Bibles and to give these sayings extra thought when studying Proverbs.

THEMES IN PROVERBS:

The course textbook, *Spotlight on the Proverbs*, is organized according to ten major themes found across sayings of different types in the book of Proverbs. To get the most out of your study of Proverbs, you should be familiar with these themes, and we urge you to read each of the ten chapters in order to thoroughly understand the concepts that lie behind the themes. Doing so will increase your ability to assess and appreciate proverbs as you read them.

The themes covered in the textbook are: 1. The Two Roads [two ways of life], 2. Getting Wisdom, 3. Humility, 4. Discretion, 5. Kindness, 6. Faithfulness, 7. Speech, 8. Peace, 9. Security, and 10. The Tree of Life. There are, of course, many other themes and sub-themes to be found in the book, but these ten are major and will provide a framework with which you can organize narrower themes and topics (such as Lying under the theme of Speech). The important thing is coming to the ability to see both the type (category) of proverb and its connection to other sayings on the same theme. The ability to see wisdom sayings in both ways provides a binocular vision that greatly enhances how you see any individual proverb.



DIFFICULT SCRIPTURES IN PROVERBS:

Despite our best efforts to understand the book of Proverbs – and in most cases these efforts are quickly and well rewarded – there may be some sayings that puzzle or trouble us. Some proverbs can be difficult for modern readers to understand – either because they are set in an ancient context which is no longer obvious to us, or in some cases because they run counter to the attitudes and sensibilities of our own time period. In this section we will look at the four problems most commonly encountered in Proverbs, as understanding these difficult scriptures is a vital part of mastering this important book.

The Giving and Taking of Bribes

Proverbs 21:14 tells us “A gift given in secret soothes anger, and a bribe concealed in the cloak pacifies great wrath.” To the modern reader this appears to be a condoning of the practice of bribery and can be troubling. To understand this proverb and others like it, we must know that the Hebrew word for “bribe” in these verses is *shachad*, which can be translated “a gift of enticement,” but it is found used in two ways. On the one hand, the word can be used negatively of bribes that aim to pervert justice, as when a person attempts to bribe a judge. This is unequivocally condemned throughout the Bible (Exodus 23:8; etc.) and in several places in Proverbs – such as “The wicked accept bribes in secret to pervert the course of justice” (Proverbs 17:23).

On the other hand, the same word is used of innocent situations in which a person is trying to gain the favor of another, as with someone who has been inadvertently offended. This is the sense of Proverbs 21:14 – to soothe anger or offense – and could be said to apply to situations such as when a husband might buy flowers for his wife or a wife take her husband out to dinner after inadvertently causing a misunderstanding or argument. But even such use of “enticing gifts” needs wisdom, of course, and anything remotely close to giving gifts to procure significant or illegal favor in business or political situations would represent nothing short of bribery from a biblical perspective.

Apparent Lack of Respect for Women

Spotlight on the Proverbs looks briefly at the fact that a number of proverbs make somewhat derogatory statements about women, and we will look at that fact a little more closely here. Proverbs such as “Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion” (11:22) or “Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and nagging wife” (21:19) might be seen as representing negative stereotypes, but they must be seen in perspective. Although Proverbs does say derogatory things about *some* women, it does not imply that all women fit such a category. We must remember that Proverbs says far more derogatory things – and far more often – about men; for example, “A quick-tempered man acts foolishly, and a devious man is hated” (14:17 BSB). While the two characters held up as being the most honorable in the whole book – the personification of wisdom and the noble woman – are both female, the two most dishonorable characters – the fool and the sluggard – are both male.

Proverbs also consistently praises good women (18:22; 19:14; etc.) and elevates them, as in “A kindhearted woman gains honor, but ruthless men gain only wealth” (11:16). Proverbs chapter 31 – the description of the noble woman – is in many ways the culminating lesson of the whole book. It is the only chapter of Proverbs given in acrostic form (each line starting with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet), so as to indicate the “A-Z” perfection of the woman of character. The truth is, Proverbs does say negative things about women – and men – when such descriptions are appropriate, but the book nowhere makes negative statements about *all* women or takes a negative approach to them.

Problematic Child Discipline

This is an area where modern sensibilities are often offended by Proverbs – usually by the famous sayings such as “Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them” (13:24) or “Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish them with the rod, they will not die” (23:13). To some modern readers this sounds painfully close to child abuse, but we should realize what is actually being said, and what is not being said. From our own modern perspective it is easy to project ideas and perceptions back into the past when that may not be necessary. First, we should remember that using a stick to discipline children was common in the ancient world – just as a “paddle” was in more recent times. But this was never the universal method of punishment – only for the discipline of older children under circumstances where it was deemed appropriate. Proverbs and other ancient literature show that such situations would include total rebellion against parents, not simple infractions of rules or standards of behavior.

We should also remember that such discipline is said to be given in love: “the one who *loves* their children...” (13:24), with the realization that physical correction may be necessary for the child’s own sake to save them from self-destructive behavior: “do not be a willing party to their death” (19:18). Interestingly, an ancient Mesopotamian proverb of exactly the type found in Proverbs is known from the seventh century BC “Withhold not your son from the rod, else you will not be able to save [him from wickedness]. If I smite you, my son, you will not die, but if I leave you to your own heart [you will not live].” This shows once again the true concern for the child in which the discipline is grounded – an attitude that Proverbs tells us is held by God himself “My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in” (3:11-12). Clearly, there should never be anything abusive or damaging in such carefully controlled discipline given in love.

Our Treatment of Enemies

Proverbs 25:21-22 tells us “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you.” Many have seen this as a thoroughly unchristian approach, presuming the meaning is that if we show kindness to our enemies God will somehow punish them on our behalf. But that this is far from an unchristian concept can be seen in that the apostle Paul quotes the whole statement – not just giving the enemy food and drink – in Romans 12:20. Obviously, Paul would not have used this proverb to illustrate his point if there had been any problem with it. It is sometimes said that the proverb refers to the practice of providing burning coals to restart enemies’ cooking and heating fires that had gone out, but reading the proverb shows that such a meaning is not what is involved, as it clearly states that the “burning coals” are the *result* of the food and drink that are given, not in addition to them.

Once again we must remember that Proverbs, like Psalms and the other biblical wisdom writings, frequently utilizes hyperbole – exaggeration for effect – in order to make its points. The proverb that tells us to hold a knife to our own throats when we eat with a person of authority (23:2) is no different from this one that speaks of heaping burning coals on our enemy’s head. The intended sense is clearly that showing our enemies kindness will provoke shame in them – just as we still use the expression “burning with shame” today. The Bible gives an example of exactly this principle in the story of Elisha, who commanded that the men of the captured Syrian army which had been attacking his people be given food and drink and returned to their homeland. Not surprisingly, the Syrian threat was ended by this event – doubtless not without a feeling of shame on the part of those who had attacked Israel at that time.

THE PRACTICAL AND SPIRITUAL NATURE OF PROVERBS:

The practical value of the book of Proverbs is evident, but many Bible readers miss seeing the spiritual aspects of this book. The fact that Proverbs was utilized frequently in the teachings of Jesus and by the New Testament writers (see “Appendix 2: Proverbs in the New Testament” in *Spotlight on the Proverbs*) should alert us to the spiritual importance of the book.

The spiritual nature of Proverbs is more wide-ranging than we often realize because it lies in the *perspective* taken by its teachings rather than the *wording* of its principles. Many of the proverbial sayings of the other cultures of the ancient Near East simply made statements regarding the nature of life without concern for any deeper significance. The biblical proverbs, on the other hand, may make simple practical statements, but they are invariably tied to a perspective that sees everything in terms of God’s existence, awareness, and involvement in human life.

This enables the biblical proverbs to ignore the common distinctions that separate the physical from the spiritual – between practical righteousness on the one hand and religious ceremony on the other. We see this, for instance, in the way Proverbs invariably stresses translating principles into practice. Just as Proverbs emphasizes both the acquisition of wisdom *and* its application (see, for example, Proverbs 13:14, “The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, turning a person from the snares of death”), so it does away with the idea that religious ceremony can somehow replace righteous living: “To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice” (Proverbs 21:3).

This is one of the most important concepts of the Old and New Testaments alike. We find it in scriptures such as Hosea 6:6, “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” – which is regarded as one of the most “spiritual” statements of the Hebrew Bible and one that was quoted as being centrally important by Jesus himself (Matthew 9:13; 12:7; etc.). The Old Testament prophets frequently warned Israel that religious ritual had no value if separated from righteous living (Isaiah 1:10-17; etc.), and Jesus reiterated the principle in his own teachings (Matthew 23:23-24; etc.).

The spiritual perspective of Proverbs is, in fact, manifested throughout the book, and perhaps the greatest single thing we can do to more fully understand Proverbs is to focus on the fact that, contrary to common opinion, it does not just represent practical wisdom, but a unique distillation of practical wisdom from a spiritual viewpoint. The following examples are just a few of the many that can be found in Proverbs – teachings that go far beyond physical statements and which reveal the spiritual understanding to be found in this book of wisdom:

All a person’s ways seem pure to them, but motives are weighed by the LORD. (16:2)

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

A person’s own folly leads to their ruin, yet their heart rages against the LORD. (19:3)

Many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the LORD’s purpose that prevails. (19:21)

Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the LORD. (23:17)

Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy. (28:13)

It is teachings of this kind that set Proverbs apart from the wisdom literature of the ancient world, and that make it a book worthy of our diligent study.

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Looking beneath the Surface

1. Summarize the three types of wisdom discussed at the beginning of this unit and find an example of each in Proverbs.
2. The importance of being a truthful witness is occasionally addressed in Proverbs, but we do not include this topic as one of the themes of the book. Does this minor topic fit into one of the ten themes of Proverbs that we do list in the textbook and if so, which one? Think of another frequent theme of Proverbs and see if that can also fit into one of the ten overarching themes you have studied.
3. Summarize the principles that explain the four types of particularly difficult scriptures in Proverbs.
4. Choose and memorize two or three verses in Proverbs that you feel best show the spiritual aspect of the book.

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