

God's Message to Us in Proverbs

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Introduction

Today, we are going to look at the book of Proverbs in our sermon series on God's Message to Us in Every Book of the Bible.

- The Proverbs are what we call wisdom literature.
- Basically, the Proverbs teach you how to live so that your life will not end up as a train wreck.
 - You might call it truth for life.
 - It is in the form of instruction of a father to a son...
 - terms that were often used of the relationship of a teacher and a pupil... stressing that instruction was relational and personal—with one who not only wanted to impart facts, but also to guide his students as a father guides a son and to live an example before them.
- A proverb itself is a tightly packaged statement of wisdom—usually written in a parallel structure... with two statements that relate to each other...
 - You can carry them with you—they are short and memorable.
 - As a random example, take Proverbs 15:7:
 - **Prov 15:7: The lips of the wise disperse knowledge, but the heart of the fool *does not do so*.**
 - You see the second line, **But the heart of the fool does not do so**, is a development of the first line: **The lips of the wise disperse knowledge.**
 - The second line shows what is opposite to the wise when it comes to spreading knowledge. The wise does it, the fool doesn't.
 - Sometimes, the second line will expand the first... as in **Prov 16:4: The LORD has made all for Himself, yes, even the wicked for the day of doom.**
 - You see how the second line here complements the first and drives home the fact that when it says God made all for Himself, all really does mean all... even the wicked.
 - There are many other kinds of relationships between the first and second line, but the main thing is that the two lines are related to each other to convey the message of the proverb.
 - And you can see what I meant when I said that a Proverb is a tightly packaged statement of wisdom.
 - To benefit from them, you need to unpack them...to think about all that they mean.
 - Jay Adams compares them to hard candy that you need to suck on.
 - You can meditate on a Proverb all day.
 - For example, when Prov 16:4 says **“The LORD has made all for Himself, Yes, even the wicked for the day of doom.”** That is a lot to chew on!
 - *Everything* is for God—that thought alone will change your life!
 - When good times or hard times come into my life—it is all for God.
 - I am here for His glory and not my own.
 - True happiness can only be found by harmonising with God's purpose instead of fighting against Him.

- The wicked is also for God—he serves God’s purposes.
 - That can lead you to think about all the OT accounts when the wicked come to oppress Israel to chasten them and then how God shows His power and justice by judging the wicked after He has used them to chasten His people.
- You can unpack that proverb all day!
- I must say that I found reading the Proverbs through from start to finish was not pleasant to me.
 - I kept wanting to stop and think about each one.
 - Reading them quickly, one after another, was a complete overload.
 - Each one is meant to be pondered rather than read over quickly.
 - Well, the first 9 chapters were okay, but after that it got much more difficult.
- And that (that the first 9 chapters are different) leads me to another introductory thought about the Proverbs...

Let me take a moment to show you how the book of Proverbs is arranged.

- **Proverbs 1:1 – 9:18** is the prologue, in which Solomon extols the virtue of wisdom and pleads with us to listen to it that it may go well with us.
- Then in **Proverbs 10:1 – 22:16**, you have collections of Proverbs from Solomon...ones that he either collected or wrote.
 - Proverbs 10:1 simply begins with the words: **“The proverbs of Solomon.”**
 - This is the section where you have Proverbs that are more or less self-contained... mostly just two lines, sometimes four.
- Then there is a section called *The Sayings of the Wise* from **22:17 to 24:34**... it is introduced with the words, **“Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise.”**
 - Some of these are paragraphs on various subjects rather than just a few lines.
- In **Proverbs 25:1 to 29:27**, you have, as it says in Proverbs 25:1, **“...the Proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah copied.”**
 - So this was a collection that Hezekiah had access to.
- And in **Proverbs 30**, you have the words of Agur, and in **Proverbs 31**, the words of King Lemuel which his mother taught him.
 - Some say that Agur and Lemuel are names for Solomon, but whoever they were, these are in a different format than the Proverbs in chapter 10-22.

I should mention as well in this introduction that various proverbs were around long before Solomon—they have a long history of use in the very ancient world.

- There is no doubt that Solomon composed many of the proverbs himself, but some of the proverbs of Solomon were ones that he collected that were already in use.
- The great thing about the proverbs we have in the Bible is that the Holy Spirit of God so worked in Solomon that all of the proverbs we have are true and righteous.
 - As we saw last week with the songs in the Psalter, they are free from the errors of men because they are part of God’s holy and infallible word.
 - He used fallible men to write His word, but He so worked in them that no errors came through—only what God wanted to say to us through them.
 - In the Proverbs you can be certain that you have counsel from God.

- As it says in Proverbs 30 verse 5, **Every word of God is pure**; and in Psalm 119:140: **Your word is very pure; therefore Your servant loves it.**
 - It is such a wonderful thing to know that you can take these Proverbs and know that what you are reading is the very word of God.
 - You don't have to evaluate whether they are right or not—you can receive them and welcome them as the very word of God, breathed out by Him for us.

With that introduction, let us now consider what God's message to us in the Proverbs is.

- My task is easier with Proverbs because Solomon tells us what the message and purpose of the Proverbs is in the first seven verses.
- Therefore, I will begin by reading it to you: Proverbs 1:1-7.
 - This is the Word of God... Give careful attention.

Proverbs 1:1-7: The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel: ² to know wisdom and instruction, to perceive the words of understanding, ³ to receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, judgment, and equity; ⁴ to give prudence to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion— ⁵ a wise *man* will hear and increase learning, and a man of understanding will attain wise counsel, ⁶ to understand a proverb and an enigma, the words of the wise and their riddles. ⁷ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction."

May God bless to us the hearing of His holy Word.

After verse one which tells us that these are the proverbs of Solomon, the son of David, the king of Israel,

- We have five statements that begin with the word "to"
 - Each of them is a reason that we have these Proverbs in God's word.

So we will begin with the question:

I. What is the purpose of this book of Proverbs? What does it have for us today?

- Let's look at the five statements that begin with the word "to."
- A. Verse 2 says: **to know wisdom and instruction.**
 - That is what the Proverbs are for.
 - They are packed with words from God that are able to make us wise.
 - 1. *Wisdom* is more than knowledge—it is knowing how to live in order that things will turn out well.
 - The wise person knows what to do and how to do it so that he or she will not end up in disaster, but in a good place.
 - 2. *Instruction* refers to training—disciplined training.
 - a. That is how wisdom comes—it is not automatic.
 - You have to form new habits of living and that takes a lot of time and effort.
 - It is like learning to play the piano, or learning to play basketball.
 - You can't just walk up the keyboard or out onto the court and perform.
 - You have to learn the way to do it right, and then you have to acquire the skills by constant use.
 - Hebrews 5:14 describes a mature person as one who, by reason of use, has their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

- b. Too often, believers want wisdom to flow into them from the air—even from the Spirit of God—from plugging into the Spirit like a current.
 - But the Spirit Himself calls us to discipline ourselves to godliness.
 - Proverbs gives us the tools to discipline ourselves if only we will set out to actually implement what they say.
- c. There are also many who err in supposing that by simply knowing them or memorising them, they will become wise,
 - But that is little better than those who want wisdom to flow into them.
 - The Spirit works through the word—and also through discipline.
 - Real spiritual growth involves discipline by the Holy Spirit.

TRANS> At the end of the day, you need the Spirit and the word, not just the Spirit and not just the word, but the Spirit who works through the word.

B. Verse 2 adds that the Proverbs are also for us **to perceive the words of understanding.**

- This speaks of how Proverbs will give you the ability to recognise truth from error—you will be able to smell out words of understanding to distinguish them from words of confusion.
 - Some versions translate, “to discern wise counsel.”
- For example, a person looking for you to co-sign a loan can make such a convincing case—they can make it sound like something you ought to do.
 - But when you read the Proverbs, you learn that this is never a wise thing to do—it is better to just give them the money than to co-sign.
 - I spoke to a man who was ruined financially by co-signing a loan.
 - He could have escaped that if he had read the Proverbs.
 - He would have been able to tell that the counsel he received to co-sign was not counsel of understanding.
- And that is just one of hundreds of examples that could be given of how the Proverbs can help you distinguish words of understanding from words of darkness.

C. In verse 3, we are told that the Proverbs are for us: **to receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, judgment, and equity.**

- The word *instruction* is that word that means disciplined training again—
 - so the Proverbs help you to receive training in wisdom justice, judgement, and equity.
- 1. **wisdom** would here refer to prudence—to keep you from living in a thoughtless manner—to teach you to be cautious.
 - So many live in a thoughtless manner, completely oblivious to the dangers they are about to walk into—for example, when feasting with a rich man,
 - you learn be careful... **Prov 23:1-2 says: Consider carefully what is before you; and put a knife to your throat if you are a man given to appetite.**
- 2. And it gives you training in **justice**...
 - You learn what is right before God and what is not right... for example, in Proverbs 23:13, you are taught that it is not wrong to chasten your son, as our government teaches...

- It says: **Prov 23:13-14: Do not withhold correction from a child, for if you beat him with a rod, he will not die. You shall beat him with a rod, and deliver his soul from hell.**
 - We need such instruction so we can from God what is right and what is wrong.
3. And it gives you training in **judgment**...
- So that you can make right decisions—know the right thing to do.
 - You learn, for example, that it is beneficial for a community for a scoffer to be punished: Prov 21:11 says: **When the scoffer is punished, the simple is made wise; but when the wise is instructed, he receives knowledge.**
4. And the Proverbs give you training in **equity**...
- You learn about using fair measurements when you sell something—a just weight and just balance...
 - In our day, that means that you don't try to cover up problems with something you are selling.

TRANS> Then in verse 4, there two “to” statements...

D. We are told that the Proverbs are given to us **to give prudence to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion.**

1. You might say that they help the naïve to learn how to live in a world that is filled with many perils.
 - You learn to be subtle (prudent) in your speech.
 - You gain knowledge and discretion about the way the world is so that you don't go along like a hapless simpleton.
2. No one has knowledge and discretion by nature, so the young man is simple until he receives this instruction from Proverbs.
 - Sadly, most people learn by experience rather than by Proverbs.
 - They learn by hard mistakes over the years instead of by Proverbs.
 - And even more sadly, some never even learn from experience...
 - they are old, but they are still as simple as ever.
3. But with Proverbs you can learn by instruction rather than by experience.
 - I remember how a friend of mine was afraid when my son was leaving home that he would be taken advantage of, having been sheltered in homeschool.
 - I was not afraid because having studied Proverbs and the rest of the scriptures, he knew more about human nature than most young adults.
 - If you read and implement the Proverbs, you can learn from them when you are young rather than having to learn through hard experience.
 - The end of Proverbs chapter 1 goes into a long discourse about this—
 - It describes the sorrows of the young man who did not listen.
 - I spoke to a young man a few months ago who by God's grace had come to repentance after years of living as a simpleton.
 - He was a child of the covenant and need not have had those wasted years if only he had listened to Proverbs.
 - By God's marvellous grace, he has been rescued and reclaimed, but there are many who never are.

TRANS> How glad we ought to be for such instruction as we have in the Proverbs!

II. We next are told in the introduction to Proverbs what we ought to do with these Proverbs—this is in verse 5-6.

A. First, it says (in v. 5) that if we are wise, we will hear and increase our learning.

1. A fool avoids wisdom...he does not want to learn.
 - He drifts along without thinking about where he is going.
 - He bumps into one thing and then another, and does not consider why his life is such a mess.
 - He is like a driver that doesn't pay any attention to the signs... he drives through lights and stop signs and goes on whichever side of the road he feels like going on.
2. But the wise are always ready to listen to the Proverbs, to **increase in learning**.
 - Can't you see how helpful it is to know how to live so that you will not end up as a shipwreck?
 - These teachings are something to be enthusiastic about—to delight in as you discover one truth after another and build a store of wisdom for living.
 - It will serve you very well!

B. Verse 5 also says that a man of understanding will attain to wise counsel.

1. The fool is wise in his own eyes.
 - He mistakes his own feelings for wisdom.
 - He is sure he knows what to do because he knows what he wants to do.
 - He wants to play during the harvest because the weather is nice.
 - Then when the winter comes, he has nothing to eat.
 - Let's put that in our context... There is a young man... he is strong and healthy and he has a lot of time... so he plays instead of preparing for life.
 - Then when he is older, he has no means to support a family.
 - He thought he was doing well at the time, but now he is unprepared and the years of opportunity have passed him by.
 - God's grace can restore, but wasted years can never be recovered.
 - He slept in the harvest and now winter has come.
2. But you see, the man of understanding will seek out counsel.
 - He wants to know what to do, he wants to know how to live.
 - He does not trust his own wisdom—he looks to the word of God for wisdom.
 - He looks to those who can direct him from the word to help him.
 - He is on the pathway to blessing.

C. People of wisdom will labour to unpack the Proverbs.

- That is what verse 6 is about: **To understand a proverb and an enigma, the words of the wise and their riddles.**
1. There is such a desire in him for wise counsel that he will work at understanding the difficult sayings...
 - The **enigmas** and the **riddles** of the wise...
 - He won't just scan over the hard sayings, but he will do the hard work of figuring them out because he wants wisdom from God.

2. Such a person will wrestle with a proverb like Proverbs 26:4-5 that first says to **answer a fool according to his folly**, and then says **do not answer a fool according to his folly**.
 - It would be easy to have it one way or another, but this wise saying calls on you to ponder—to consider when to answer and when not to answer.
3. The hard sayings are like new software.
 - You have to work at figuring out how to use it, how it all works.
 - But once you learn, there is a great reward for your efforts.

TRANS> So labour to understand the sayings in this book.

- That is what verses 5 & 6 teach you.
- But now we come to the climax of the introduction to the Proverbs.

III. What is the foundation of all our wisdom? We are told that in v. 7.

A. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

1. What is *the fear of the LORD*?
 - a. The LORD is, of course, God's great covenant name.
 - 1) It means simply "I am."
 - It speaks of Him as the only one who exists independently of all others—all others were created by Him.
 - He alone, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the self-existing one—Yahweh—"I am,"
 - 2) It speaks of Him as sovereign—having rule and control of all.
 - In Him we live and move and have our being...
 - In Him we have our very breath, which He will take away whenever He pleases.
 - 3) It speaks of Him as the one who has made a covenant with us.
 - He revealed this name to His people when He was rearranging the nations of the world to bring them forth to their own land to worship Him according to His commandments.
 - And to bring forth from them the Saviour of the world from heaven.
 - In redeeming these people and preserving them, He showed that He was LORD.
 - There is no other God than this one who is LORD—the One who sent Jesus Christ to the people of Israel.
 - Wisdom begins when we fear Him, not some idol that is only called God but who is not the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- b. To fear Him means that you realise how much He matters.
 - 1) Most of us would be afraid to jump off a cliff onto jagged rocks and that is a good thing.
 - We know how much it matters if we do that.
 - It would change everything for us.
 - 2) Most of us are afraid of being nasty to the people we work with.
 - And even more so when they are people we like.

- Why? It is because they matter to us.
 - We enjoy their company and we would like to continue in a good relationship with them.
 - If they are all offended, it would make you unhappy, not only because they might retaliate, but also because you would lose the joys of friendship with them.
 - They matter to you.
- 3) But who matters more than the sovereign LORD?
- He is the one who, as Jesus said, has the power to destroy not only the body, but both the body and the soul in hell!
 - The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.
 - If things are going to come out right in the end for you... if your life is to end up with blessing—then fearing Him is indispensable.
 - You can't ignore Him and expect *anything* to come out right in the end of it all.
- But it says the fear of Him is the beginning of wisdom...
2. What does *beginning* mean here?
- a. It is the starting point—the foundation of everything.
- You can't build a house—not a house that will stand for long—without a foundation.
 - You can even be very smart about installing windows and doing framing and laying bricks... but without a foundation you might as well not bother.
 - Wisdom is about coming out right at the end—and without the fear of the LORD as your foundation, you won't come out right!
 - That is the reason I refuse to counsel an unbeliever.
 - If they come to me wanting to work on their marriage, I will call them to come to Christ with their whole life.
 - If they just want to fix bits and pieces of their life, but are not interested in following the Lord, what good is it?
 - If they are unwilling to do that, why should I teach them about brickwork when the wall they build is going to fall down?
 - It would be wrong of me to lead them along in their own delusion that they are getting along well when they have no foundation.
- b. So you haven't even begun to be wise until you fear the Lord.
- Again, wisdom has to do with living so that you come out right in the end.
 - If you ignore the judge of all the earth, you cannot possibly come out right in the end.
 - You need to know what He requires of you.
 - You need to know how He would have you to live.
 - You need to know what He has provided for you to be saved.
 - If you don't care about that, you are a complete fool.
 - You haven't even started to go down the right path.

- B. Look at how the fool is described—it is rather striking.
- **Fools despise wisdom and instruction.**
 - 1. It is not just that they are weak and stumble along when it comes to serving God.
 - They *are* weak and they *do* stumble along.
 - But the reason they are weak and stumble is because of a hatred at the core of them for true wisdom and instruction.
 - They actually don't want to know how to live.
 - They don't want to be told what to do.
 - 2. This goes right back to the fall.
 - We shut up our ears to God's counsel.
 - Instead of learning from Him, we set ourselves to go our own way—and we don't want anyone to tell us otherwise—
- C. It is only when we are born again that we are changed and ready to learn wisdom from above.
1. The new birth is from God.
 - It is a new nature that He gives us.
 2. You cannot get yourself born again.
 - You are not commanded to be born again.
 - You are commanded to come to Jesus Christ to be saved.
 - You are commanded to recognise that God is the judge of all the earth and that you are not right with Him unless you are pardoned for you sin.
 - God is holy, and He will not have anything with sin before Him.
 - The only way to obtain pardon is by trusting in the One God sent, His only Son, who died for sinners.
 - If you come to Him, looking to Him for pardon and for new life, He will receive you—He will welcome you.
 3. Everything starts with God.
 - We went away from Him, and that is why all has gone wrong.
 - But by coming to Christ the Saviour, we can come back to Him so that we fear Him as the true and living God.
 - That is where wisdom begins.
 - All of life must be lived *coram Deo*, before the face of God.

Conclusion: May it be that all of you will obtain the foundation of this wisdom and then go forward in all of its wonderful ways.