

## INTRODUCTION TO AND SUGGESTED GUIDANCE FOR MAKING THE MOST OF PROVERBS

The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament is comprised of five books; Job, Psalms Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. In these books, there are no new laws given (as in the first five books of the Old Testament), and there are no great events recorded (as one would expect in the books of History and Prophecy). And rather than being about the nation of Israel, these books are about individuals. They apply God's laws not so much to the corporate people of God as the Prophets do, but to individuals and the great issues we face in our daily lives.

What we find in the Book of Proverbs is the most extensive, straight forward, ethical section in the Bible. Christians have always recognized the treasury of the practical wisdom found in the Proverbs. When Paul wanted to talk about humility and unity, where did he turn? To the Proverbs. (Compare Romans 12:16 to Proverbs 3:7; and Romans 12:20 to Proverbs 25:21-22) When Peter wanted to write to young churches about conceit, dissensions, folly, and judgement, where did he turn? To the Proverbs. (Compare 1 Peter 5:5 to Prov. 3:34; and 1 Peter 4:8 to Prov. 10:12; or 1 Peter 4:18 to Prov. 11:31; and 2 Peter 2:22 go Prov. 26:11) When James wanted to talk about pride and presumption, where did he turn? To the Proverbs. (Compare James 4:6 to Prov. 3:34 and James 4:13-14 to Prov. 27:1) When the writer of Hebrews wanted to encourage Christians who were enduring suffering, where did he turn? To the Proverbs. (Compare Heb. 12:5-6 to Prov. 3:11-12) Even Jesus himself wove a parable in Luke 14 out of one of these proverbs. (See Luke 14:8-10 vs. Prov. 25:6-7)

From Mark Dever's book *The Message of the Old Testament*

Unlike the didactic books of the NT, such as Romans, there is no sustained argument in the book of Proverbs, nor is there much of a logical structure in any particular paragraph. Rather, the book of Proverbs is largely a collection of separate, isolated, self-contained observations on reality which tell us how best to cope. The vast majority are units of thought unto themselves and could conceivably be placed in any order.

As far as the nature of these self-contained units is concerned, they are best described as concise and forcefully expressive ("*pithy*") *sayings*. They are simple illustrations which expose and expound upon fundamental realities of life. Someone once referred to them as ***compressed experience***. They are not unlike our many English proverbs, such as:

"A rolling stone gathers no moss"

"Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater"

"A penny saved is a penny earned"

"You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink", etc.

From Sam Storms – Lead Pastor Bridgeway Church, Edmond, OK

### It's Overarching Theme

Proverbs states its overarching theme right at the book's beginning (1:1-7): its goal is to describe and instill "wisdom" in God's people, a wisdom that is founded in the "fear of the Lord" and that works out covenant life in the practical details of everyday situations and relationships.

### Other Key Themes

Proverbs covers a wide array of topics from daily life: diligence and laziness (6:6-11); friendship (3:27-28, 18:24); speech (10:19-21); marriage (18:22, 19:14); child rearing (22:6); domestic peace (15:17, 17:1); work (11:1); getting along and good manners (23:1-2, 25:16-17, 26:17-19, 27:14); eternity (14:32, 23:17-18); and much more. In each of these areas, Proverbs offers wisdom for realizing the life of the covenant in the details; it shows that *"godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come"* (1 Tim. 4:8). It clearly demonstrates clearly that:

- \* God's will is intensely practical, applying to every aspect of His people's lives. A proper relationship to God involves, first, trying hard to understand His truth and His will, then embracing and obeying what one understands.
- \* A life lived by God's will is a happy life (3:21-26).
- \* A life lived by God's will is a useful life (3:27-29, 12:18,25).
- \* A life lived by God's will does not just happen; one must seek after it, study, pursue it, and discipline oneself to apprehend it.
- \* Such a life is available to those who go after it (9:1-6).

### It's Key Term

The key term in Proverbs is of course "wisdom". The word (Heb. *Khokmah*) can have the nuance of "skill" (as it does in Exodus 28:3), particularly the skill of choosing the right course of action for the desired result. In the covenantal framework of Proverbs, it denotes "skill in the art of godly living."

From the ESV Study Bible's Introduction to Proverbs

However, because so much of the book is written in short, condensed statements that are usually contained within a single sentence or two, parts of Proverbs can be puzzling to people. Hence, this book – like almost anything else that is good for you - - can be misunderstood and misused. Here, I would like to offer several clues to help you in reading Proverbs, especially the more difficult or obscure ones. These clues will help you get ahold of the wonderful wisdom this book has for you.

***Common sense is required.*** One of the first tools we have to employ for understanding the Proverbs is an important tool for understanding any part of the Bible: common sense. For instance, we sometimes say, “Look before you leap.” Well, what if, on one occasion, you do leap without looking and you don’t get hurt? Does that mean that the proverb is false? Not at all. We recognize that the saying is useful for indicating what is generally true. Not only that, but we all recognize that this proverb is applicable to more than the topic of jumping. It’s the same way with individual proverbs in the Bible. The mere fact that you are opening the Bible does not mean that you have to throw common sense out the window.

***Individual proverbs are always ultimately true.*** We must realize that individual proverbs will not always appear to be immediately true, but they will always be ultimately true. For instance, one proverb in chapter 16 reads “When a man’s ways are pleasing to the Lord, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him (16:7). But what about the life of Jesus? His enemies were hardly at peace with him. Still, we know that ultimately, God will cause Jesus’ enemies to live at peace with him. Every knee will bow to the King of Kings.

***As a whole, the proverbs are religious in nature.*** Proverbs is a profoundly religious book. By that I do not mean that it contains a lot about formal corporate worship, sacrifices, or prayer; but I do mean that it is not simply a book of secular proverbs, like “Early to be, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.” It is a book about our lives before God. Indeed, it tells us that the good life can be found only in wisdom about God and about ourselves.

Again from Mark Dever

**Proverbs are not legal guarantees from God.** Proverbs state a wise way to approach certain selected practical goals but to do so in terms that cannot be treated like a divine warranty of success. The particular blessings, rewards, and opportunities mentioned in Proverbs are likely to follow if one will choose the wise courses of action outlined in the poetic, figurative language of the book. But nowhere does Proverbs teach automatic success.

**Proverbs are worded to be memorable, not to be theoretically accurate.** No proverb is so perfectly worded that it can stand up to the unreasonable demand that it apply in every

situation at every time. The more briefly and parabolically a principal is stated, the more common sense and good judgement are needed to interpret it properly – but the more effective and memorable it is. Proverbs try to impart knowledge that can be retained rather than philosophy that can impress a critic.

From Gordon Fee & Stuart Douglas' book How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth



