The Book of Proverbs

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Introduction

This book of wisdom contains instruction on many practical matters of daily life. It is a virtual library of moral instruction, beneficial for both young and old, to ensure a happy life here and eternal reward in the life to come. Proverbs is a divine textbook designed to school the young in right living by the repetition of wise thoughts. “It is wisdom distilled into short, sharp phrases, dramatic contrasts, and unforgettable scenes from life.” What the Psalms are to devotional life, the Proverbs are to practical life.

Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary says a proverb is “a short, pithy statement about human nature and life. In the Bible Solomon is singled out for his use of proverbs (1 Kings 4:32). His wisdom was shown by his ability to make clear, true commentaries upon the nature of things. The Hebrew word most frequently translated as proverb means literally ‘a similitude,’ or loosely, ‘a representation.’ So when God declared that Israel would be ‘a proverb . . . among all peoples’ (1 Kings 9:7), He implied that the name Israel would come to symbolize disobedience. Proverbs are designed to make God’s truth accessible to all people, so they might direct their lives in accordance with His will.”

1 Kings 4:32 ... 32 He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. (NASB95)

1 Kings 9:6-7 ... 6 “But if you or your sons indeed turn away from following Me, and do not keep My commandments and My statutes which I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, 7 then I will cut off Israel from the land which I have given them, and the house which I have consecrated for My name, I will cast out of My sight. So Israel will become a proverb and a byword among all peoples. (NASB95)

Theme

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom (Prov. 1:7; 9:10; 15:33). Its blessings are length of days and fullness of life (Prov. 10:27; 14:27). True wisdom is based on respect and reverence for God. We must be mindful of what is acceptable and unacceptable in the sight of God.

Proverbs 1:7 ... 7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction. (NASB95)

Proverbs 9:10 ... 10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. (NASB95)
Proverbs 15:33 ... 33 The fear of the Lord is the instruction for wisdom, And before honor comes humility. (NASB95)

Proverbs 10:27 ... 27 The fear of the Lord prolongs life, But the years of the wicked will be shortened. (NASB95)

Proverbs 14:27 ... 27 The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, That one may avoid the snares of death. (NASB95)

This book covers a wide variety of subjects: How to choose the right kind of friends, the dangers of adultery, the value of hard work, the importance of honest business dealings, the folly of pride, anger, strife, gluttony and laziness, and the characteristics of real and lasting friendship.

Authorship

Many of the proverbs were written by Solomon, who reigned over Israel from 971-931 B.C. (Prov. 1:1; 10:1; 25:1). He is identified as the author of Proverbs 10:1-22:16, as well as the latter chapters 25-29. Solomon was noted throughout the ancient world for his great wisdom (1 Kings 4:29-34). However, Solomon did not write the whole book. Major sections are attributed to other writers, such as “the wise” (Prov. 22:17), Agur (Prov. 30:1), and King Lemuel (Prov. 31:1).

Proverbs 1:1 ... 1 The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel: (NASB95)

Proverbs 10:1 ... 1 The proverbs of Solomon. A wise son makes a father glad, But a foolish son is a grief to his mother. (NASB95)

Proverbs 25:1 ... 1 These also are proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, transcribed. (NASB95)

1 Kings 4:29-34 ... 29 Now God gave Solomon wisdom and very great discernment and breadth of mind, like the sand that is on the seashore. 30 Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. 31 For he was wiser than all men, than Ethan the Ezrahite, Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol; and his fame was known in all the surrounding nations. 32 He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. 33 He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even to the hyssop that grows on the wall; he spoke also of animals and birds and creeping things and fish. 34 Men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom. (NASB95)

Proverbs 22:17 ... 17 Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise, And apply your mind to my knowledge; (NASB95)

Proverbs 30:1 ... 1 The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, the oracle. The man declares to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ucal: (NASB95)

Proverbs 31:1 ... 1 The words of King Lemuel, the oracle which his mother taught him: (NASB95)
It is interesting to note that the second group of proverbs attributed to Solomon ( chapters 25-29) was not added to the collection until more than 200 years after his death (Prov. 25:1). Perhaps these writings were somehow lost, and not rediscovered until the time of Hezekiah.

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**Recipients**

The book was written for Solomon’s son (Prov. 1:8; 2:1, etc.), presumably Rehoboam. Yet, in reality this book is designed for young men (Prov. 4:1), and in the broadest scope it provides instruction for all, regardless of age or gender – men and women, boys and girls (Prov. 8:1-5).

Proverbs 1:8 ... 8 Hear, my son, your father’s instruction And do not forsake your mother’s teaching; (NASB95)

Proverbs 2:1 ... 1 My son, if you will receive my words And treasure my commandments within you, (NASB95)

Proverbs 4:1 ... 1 Hear, O sons, the instruction of a father, And give attention that you may gain understanding, (NASB95)

Proverbs 8:1-5 ... 1 Does not wisdom call, And understanding lift up her voice? 2 On top of the heights beside the way, Where the paths meet, she takes her stand; 3 Beside the gates, at the opening to the city, At the entrance of the doors, she cries out: 4 “To you, O men, I call, And my voice is to the sons of men. 5 “O naive ones, understand prudence; And, O fools, understand wisdom. (NASB95)

**Style**

Proverbs is a part of the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament. Also included in this category are Job, certain of the Psalms, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. These books grapple with some of the eternal questions of life. Solomon was especially qualified to address such questions (1 Kings 4:30-31).

1 Kings 4:30-31 ... 30 Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. 31 For he was wiser than all men, than Ethan the Ezrahite, Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol; and his fame was known in all the surrounding nations. (NASB95)

**Special Considerations**

We must be careful not to turn these proverbial sayings into literal promises. Proverbs are a declaration of general truths. However, there are exceptions. What is generally true is not invariably true. For example: It is generally true that those who keep God’s commandments will enjoy “length of days and long life” (Prov. 3:1-2), however we also know that some suffer and
die for their faith. The writers of Proverbs do not deny that there are exceptions. But exceptions are not within the scope of proverbial sayings.

*Proverbs 3:1-2 ... 1 My son, do not forget my teaching, But let your heart keep my commandments; 2 For length of days and years of life And peace they will add to you.* (NASB95)

**Arrangement**

The book is divided into eight sections: a general introduction on wisdom (Prov. 1-9), six collections of wise sayings (Prov. 10:1-31:9), and a description of the virtuous wife (Prov. 31:10-31).

**Nelson’s Bible Dictionary Outline of Proverbs**

The following outline was taken from Nelson’s Teaching Outlines of the Bible, published by Thomas Nelson Publishers in 1997.

I. The Purpose of Proverbs (1:1-7)

II. Proverbs to the Youth (1:8-9:18)
   A. Obey Parents (1:8-9)
   B. Avoid Bad Company (1:10-19)
   C. Seek Wisdom (1:20-2:22)
   D. Benefits of Wisdom (3:1-26)
   E. Be Kind to Others (3:27-35)
   F. Security in Wisdom (4:1-13)
   G. Avoid the Wicked (4:14-22)
   H. Keep Your Heart (4:23-27)
   I. Do Not Commit Adultery (5:1-14)
   J. Be Faithful to Your Spouse (5:15-23)
   K. Avoid Surety (6:1-5)
   L. Do Not Be Lazy (6:6-19)
   M. Do Not Commit Adultery (6:20-7:27)
   N. Praise of Wisdom (8:1-9:12)
   O. Avoid Folly (9:13-18)

III. Proverbs of Solomon (10:1-24:34)
   A. Proverbs Contrasting the Godly and the Wicked (10:1-15:33)

IV. Proverbs Concerning Various Situations (22:17-24:34)

V. Proverbs of Solomon Copied by Hezekiah’s Men (25:1-29:27)
   A. Proverbs Regulating Relationships with Others (25:1-26:28)
      1. Relationships with Kings (25:1-7)
      2. Relationships with Neighbors (25:8-20)
5. Relationships with Fools (26:1-12)
6. Relationships with Sluggards (26:13-16)
7. Relationships with Gossips (26:17-28)

B. Proverbs Regulating Various Activities (27:1-29:27)

VI. The Words of Agur (30)

VII. The Words of King Lemuel (31)
   A. Wisdom for Leaders (31:1-9)
   B. The Wise Woman (31:10-31)

LaGard Smith’s Outline of Proverbs

The following topical arrangement was set forth by F. LaGard Smith in The Narrated Bible, published by Harvest House Publishers in 1984.

I. Introduction to Wisdom
   Solomon’s Personal Plea (4:1-27)

II. Proverbs of Solomon and Sayings of the Wise
   The Value of Wise Sayings (22:17-21).
   The Purpose of the Proverbs (1:1-7; 25:1).
   I. Preeminence of God
   II. Insight and Ignorance
   III. Sharing and Responding to Wisdom
      B. The Value of Advisors (11:14; 15:22; 20:18; 24:5-6).
E. Repentance (14:9; 28:13).

IV. Good and Evil

V. Sincere Motivation
   A. Motive and the Heart (15:11; 16:2; 17:3; 20:11; 20:27; 21:2; 27:19).

VI. Concern for Others
   D. Overstaying Welcome (25:16-17).

VII. Concern for Self
   B. Selfishness (18:1).
   C. Jealousy (27:4).
   D. Envy (14:30; 24:19-20).
   E. Greed (28:25)

VII. Control of Self
   A. Self-control (25:28; 29:11).
   D. Drunkenness and Gluttony (20:1; 23:19-21; 23:29-35).
   F. Prostitution (23:26-28; 29:3).

VII. Control of the Tongue
   E. Controlled Speech (15:1; 17:27; 25:15).
   I. Quarreling (17:14; 17:19; 20:3; 22:10; 26:21).

VIII. Disharmony and Strife
A. Solicitation to Evil (1:10-19; 16:29; 25:26; 27:3; 28:10).
C. Murders (28:17).
D. Causing Others Harm (3:29-30).
E. Revenge (20:22; 24:28-29).
F. Dissension and Strife (6:16-19; 17:1; 18:18-19).
G. Meddling (26:17).

IX. Honesty
B. Accurate Weights (11:1; 16:11; 20:10; 20:23).
C. Boundary Stones (22:28; 23:10-11).
D. Wrongfully Obtained Gains (10:2; 13:11; 20:17; 20:21).

XI. Justice
B. Open-Mindedness (18:17).

XII. Economic Well-Being
29:13).
E. Conservation (21:20).

XIII. Persons and Attributes
A. Parents and Children (1:8-9; 10:1; 11:29; 15:20; 17:2; 17:6; 17:21; 17:25;
B. The Elderly (16:31; 20:29).
D. Kings and Rulers (14:28; 14:35; 16:10; 16:12-15; 17:7; 17:11; 19:12;
20:2; 20:8; 20:26; 20:28; 21:1; 22:11; 23:1-3; 24:21-22; 25:2-7; 28:2-3;
E. Messengers (13:17; 25:13).

XIV. Various Concerns
B. Reputation (22:1; 25:9-10).

XV. Various Observations
B. Good News (15:30; 25:25).
C. Curiosity (27:20).


IV. Sayings of King Lemuel (31:1-3; 31:4-7; 31:8-9).

V. The Wife of Noble Character (31:10-31).

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