



Proverbs

Video Transcript

Introduction

00:00-01:03

The book of Proverbs. The word “proverb” typically refers to a short, clever saying that offers some kind of wisdom, and this book has a lot of those, but they’re almost all in the center section of the book, chapters 10-29. But there is way more going on in the book of Proverbs, especially at the beginning, chapters 1-9, and the conclusion, chapters 30 and 31.

The book’s been designed with an introduction, chapter 1 verses 1-9, and it first of all links this book to King Solomon. Now, remember the story in 1 Kings chapter 3. Solomon had asked God for wisdom to lead Israel well, and so Solomon became known as the wisest man in the ancient world. And we’re told in 1 Kings chapter 4 that he wrote thousands of proverbs and poems and collected knowledge about plants and animals. So Solomon was like the fountainhead of Israel’s wisdom literature. So while not all the material in this book is written by him personally, he is where Israel’s wisdom tradition began.

Chapters 1-9

01:04-04:34

The introduction says that by reading this book, you too can gain wisdom. Now, wisdom for most of us means knowledge, but the Hebrew word *khokhmah* means much more than just mental activity; it refers to action also, so think skill or applied knowledge. This is why, back in the book of Exodus chapter 31, it was artists and craftsmen in Israel who were said to have *khokhmah*.

So the purpose of this book is to help you develop a set of practical skills for living well in God’s world, and this gets linked with another key idea in the introduction, the fear of the Lord.

Now, fear here is not about terror. It's about a healthy sense of reverence and awe for God and about my place in the universe. It's a moral mindset that recognizes I am not God and that I don't get to make up my own definitions of good and evil and right and wrong. Rather, I need to humble myself before God and embrace God's definition of right and wrong, even when that's inconvenient for me.

Now, this introduction leads us into the first main section of the book, chapters 1-9, which also doesn't contain short one-liner proverbs. Rather, what we find here are 10 speeches from a father to a son about how the son should listen to wisdom and cultivate the fear of the Lord and live accordingly, which means a life of virtue and integrity and generosity, all of which lead to success and peace.

The father warns his son also about folly and evil and stupid decisions that will breed selfishness and pride, all leading to ruin and shame. And so the son should make the pursuit of wisdom and the fear of the Lord his highest goal in life. And this way of thinking, it forms the moral logic of this entire book.

Now, these speeches from the father also clue us in to what biblical wisdom literature is and how it's different from other parts of the Bible. These books explore how to live well in God's world, but wisdom is not the same as law, like what Moses gave Israel at Mount Sinai. And it's not the same as prophecy, divine speech to God's people. Rather, wisdom literature has the accumulated insight of God's people through the generations about how to live in a way that honors God and others. And so, through the book of Proverbs now, these human words about wisdom have been put together as God's word and wisdom to his people. Which connects to the other thing you find in chapters 1-9.

There are four poems from Lady Wisdom. Here, wisdom has been poetically personified as a woman who calls out to humanity to pay attention and to seek her. Wisdom says that she is woven into the fabric of the universe, and so wherever you see people making wise decisions, they are relying on her. So you see someone being generous or having sexual integrity or upholding justice—they are drawing on wisdom.

These Lady Wisdom poems, they're a creative, poetic way of exploring this idea that we live in God's moral universe and that goodness and justice are objective realities that we ignore to our own peril. And so fearing the Lord, living wisely, it's living along the grain of the universe.

Now together, these two sets of speeches, from the father and Lady Wisdom, they make a powerful claim about this book: that you're not simply reading good advice, you're reading God's own invitation to learn wisdom from previous generations.

Chapters 10-29

04:35-06:36

And so in the next section of the book, chapters 10-29, we find hundreds of ancient proverbs, and they apply wisdom and the fear of the Lord to every life topic you could imagine: family, work, neighborhood, friendship, sex, marriage, money, anger, forgiveness, alcohol, debt—everything. And these are all filtered through the value system of Proverbs 1-9.

Now, these proverbs, they're all pretty short. They're easy to memorize, and actually this section of the book is meant to become a reference work that you return to time and time again throughout the years, which raises some important issues in learning how to read these proverbs.

First of all, proverbs are by nature about probabilities. So you fear the Lord and you make wise, good choices, things will likely go well for you. And if you don't fear the Lord, you're foolish, your life will likely not go so well. Now, that is all often true—but not always. Which leads to the next point, that proverbs are not promises. They're not formulas for success. So some proverbs for example: "The fear of the Lord prolongs your life, but the years of the wicked are cut short." Or, "Train up a child in the way they should go, and when they're old they won't turn from it." So yes, fearing God, being a moral person will most likely lead to a better, longer life. And raising your kids in a stable, loving home does set them up well, but there are no guarantees. Lots of things can and often do go wrong in our world.

And so lastly, proverbs, by nature, focus on the general rule but not the exceptions, which are many. And the wisdom books actually are not ignorant of that. The exceptions are what the other wisdom books, Job and Ecclesiastes, are all about. And together, these acknowledge that life is too complex for simple formulas, which is why we need all of the wisdom books together to get the bigger picture. This all leads to the final section of the book, two large collections of poems.

Chapter 30

06:36-07:01

First, poems from a man named Agur, who begins by acknowledging his own ignorance and folly and his great need for God's wisdom. And then Agur discovers that divine wisdom has been given to him in the Scriptures, which teach him how to live well. And so Agur is put before us as like a model reader of the book of Proverbs, somebody who is always open to hearing God's wisdom through the Scriptures.

Chapter 31

07:02-07:40

The final poems are connected to a man named Lemuel. He's a non-Israelite king, and he passes on the wisdom that was given to him by his mom. It's guidance for being a wise and just leader, and then the final poem is an acrostic, or an alphabet poem, where each line begins with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

And the entire poem is about the woman of noble character. It depicts a woman who lives according to the wisdom of proverbs and stands like a model of someone who takes God's wisdom and then translates it into practical decisions in everyday life, at work or at home, in her family and in her community.

Conclusion

07:41-08:07

So the book opens with words from a father to a son about listening to Lady Wisdom, and so now the book closes by offering the words of a mother to her son about a woman who lives wisely.

The book of Proverbs is for every person in every season of life. It's a guide for living wisely and well in God's good world. And that's what the book of Proverbs is all about.