

# THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM



7 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR  
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS



# THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM



Proverbs is a favourite book of the Old Testament for many Christians. It's so full of practical advice on how to live wisely and well in God's world.

But is Proverbs more than just a large collection of pithy sayings? What is the overall message of the book of Proverbs? And how does understanding Proverbs as a whole help us understand and apply each of the individual sayings?

In this first of two volumes of studies, Joshua Ng answers these questions by guiding us through the first nine chapters of Proverbs. In the process, we learn much about the wise and foolish life, about what it means to 'fear' God, and about how the teaching of Proverbs relates to Jesus and the teaching of the whole Bible.

Ideal for small groups or individuals.

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PROVERBS VOL.1

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SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

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## » HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THESE STUDIES

### 1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

Interactive Bible Studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you through a particular part of the Bible, helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God's word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of 'interaction'—interaction with the Bible, with the things we've written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

## 2. The format

The studies contain five main components:

- sections of text that introduce, inform, summarize and challenge
- numbered questions that help you examine the passage and think through its meaning
- sidebars that provide extra bits of background or optional extra study ideas, especially regarding other relevant parts of the Bible
- ‘Implications’ sections that help you think about what this passage means for you and your life today
- suggestions for thanksgiving and prayer as you close.

## 3. How to use these studies on your own

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learnt.

## 4. How to use these studies in a small group

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don’t need the formal structure of a ‘group’ to gain maximum benefit.



- For small groups, it is *very useful* if group members can work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining the sections of text to emphasize and read out loud, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- If your group members usually don't work through the study in advance, it's extra important that the leader prepares which parts to concentrate on, and which parts to glide past more quickly. In particular, the leader will need to select which of the 'Implications' to focus on.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the Bible, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

## 5. Bible translation

Previous studies in our Interactive Bible Study series have assumed that most readers would be using the New International Version of the Bible. However, since the release of the English Standard Version in 2001, many have switched to the ESV for study purposes. For this reason, we have decided to quote from and refer to the ESV text, which we recommend.



## » STUDY 1

# THE PURPOSE OF PROVERBS

1. Proverbs is a favourite part of the Bible for many Christians. We love its short, pithy insights into the nature of life in God's world, and its practical encouragements to live God's way. Share one or two of your favourite proverbs from Proverbs.

- Why do you like them?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- How do they help you in your Christian life?

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## Proverbs as a whole

Our favourite Proverbs most likely come from chapters 10-31 of Proverbs. This main section consists of six collections of proverbial sayings, each headed by the phrase, "The proverbs/words/sayings of...":

- i. "The proverbs of Solomon." (10:1)
- ii. "Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise..." (22:17)
- iii. "These also are sayings of the wise." (24:23)
- iv. "These also are proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied." (25:1)
- v. "The words of Agur son of Jakeh. The oracle." (30:1)
- vi. "The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him..." (31:1)

MOST OF THE INDIVIDUAL sayings in Proverbs are very short. Some run for several verses but most are just a single verse, and seemingly stand on their own. And this is how we tend to think of Proverbs—as a fairly random collection of little snippets of wisdom, each of which can be understood and applied fairly easily to our lives.

However, understanding the book of **Proverbs as a whole** takes a bit more time and effort. As with any part of the Bible, knowing the whole context enables us to apply any individual portion of God's word properly, so that we see and feel more sharply the challenge of its encouragements and rebukes. And Proverbs is no exception. Let us begin this series of studies by looking at the purpose of Proverbs.

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### Read any verses at random from Proverbs 1-9.

2. How are these chapters different in style from chapters 10-31?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. Now glance quickly over Proverbs 1-9, and try to summarize the emphasis of these chapters in a sentence or two.

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4. Look up the following verses from Proverbs 1-9 (if you are studying in a group, you might like to divide them up among group members). In each case, who is talking to whom? And what kind of 'talk' is it?

- 1:8
- 2:1
- 3:1
- 3:11-12
- 4:1
- 4:10-11
- 4:20
- 5:1-2
- 6:1-3
- 6:20-22
- 7:1-3
- 7:24
- 8:32-34

5. Based on what you've looked at so far, how would you say Proverbs 1-9 relates to Proverbs 10-31?

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WHILE SOME SPEAK OF PROVERBS 1-9 as the first collection of proverbs, it is more like an introduction or preparation for the six collections of sayings that follow. It is not so much a ‘pep talk’ as a ‘prep talk’, as when a father says, “Come on, son, let’s sit down and talk man to man, and I’ll teach you what life is all about”.

Proverbs assumes that teaching and wisdom ought to flow from parent to

child. Moreover, the father is seen as none other than Solomon himself (1:1), the great wise man of the Old Testament. Proverbs 1-9 thus functions as an introductory framework through which we are to read chapters 10-31.

To see exactly how Proverbs 1-9 introduces and frames chapters 10-31, let’s first look at Proverbs 1:1-7, which is like the ‘introduction to the introduction’.

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### Read Proverbs 1:1–7.

6. What are the explicitly stated purposes of this book that is known as “The proverbs of Solomon”?

7. Who is it for?

8. How do we get this wisdom?

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IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOTICE first that in outlining the purposes of Proverbs, this **'introduction to the introduction'** begins to tell us what 'wisdom' really is.

Wisdom involves knowledge—it includes knowing instruction and understanding words of insight (1:2). We need to put our minds into gear. Yet it is not merely theoretical, but immensely practical for daily living. Thus it's about "wise dealing", "prudence", and showing "discretion" in what we do and say (1:2-4). In other words, the wise person carefully weighs things up, rather than just acting on impulse and then regretting the consequences. Yes, wisdom involves learning, but it is learning that gives guidance for life (1:5). It's not about getting a master's degree, so much as mastering life. Wisdom is about being 'street smart', rather than just having lots of theoretical knowledge. It's the difference between someone who just graduated with an MBA, and someone who has been out there in the business world for ten years and knows how to deal with people and achieve successful outcomes. As Derek Kidner puts it: "Wisdom leaves its signature on anything well made or well judged... an apt remark... a shrewd policy... noble action".<sup>1</sup>

Proverbs would say that what's important is not your IQ, but your WQ—your 'wisdom quotient'!

Wisdom, then, is for all people. If we are the "simple" who foolishly love being simple (1:22), then we really need to repent and so gain prudence (1:4). If we are already the "wise", then let us not think we have arrived, but know that we need more wisdom and can "increase in learning" (1:5). Unlike our IQ, our WQ can keep increasing, no matter who we are.

## Introduction to the introduction

The climax of this 'introduction to the introduction' tells us that the key to the getting of wisdom is "the fear of the LORD" (1:7). We will come back to this in much more detail in study 4.

Furthermore, Proverbs 1:6 indicates that one purpose of Proverbs as a whole is that we may be able to understand any particular proverb, the way it expresses itself, as well as its meaning and application. No single proverb ultimately stands on its own, or says everything there is to say about a topic. That is, we must understand the part in the light of the whole. To rightly understand and apply any individual proverbial saying, we need not only the framework of Proverbs 1-9, but also the content and context of the rest of the book of Proverbs. But more of that in study 7.

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## » Implications

- In what areas of life do you think you need guidance to increase your WQ?
  
- "To obey the Bible is to be the truly practical person." Comment. Is this always true?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Look back at the favourite proverbs you mentioned at the beginning of this study. How do they fit into the overall purpose of Proverbs?

## » Give thanks and pray

- Thank God that he cares for us and wants to instruct us in practical living.
- Given the purpose of Proverbs, write a prayer for yourself as you embark on this series of studies.

### Endnote

1. D Kidner, *Proverbs: An introduction and commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, DJ Wiseman (gen. ed.), IVP, Leicester, 1964, p. 13.