

Proverbs

By Cougan Collins

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PROVERBS

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Spiritual “equipment” for the contest of life



*I dedicate this book to my loving wife, Erica,
and my two daughters.*

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(All Scriptures are taken from the NKJV unless otherwise stated)

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Proverbs contains words to live by. Solomon wrote many of these timeless sayings, but other wise men added to the wisdom of this book which teaches one how to conduct his life. Though written long ago, the wisdom found in this great book applies to us today. With its practical advice on daily living and how we should treat those around us, it should be read and studied often by Christians.

This study on Proverbs is designed to walk you through various chapters and topics that will teach you about practical Christian living. While the New Testament is our authority, the Book of Proverbs will help you be a better servant of God, which will help you become more effective at leading others to Christ. This study will challenge you to take a closer look at yourself and how you are living for the Lord. I hope this study will help you grow stronger in the faith, and cause you to focus more on serving God with your whole heart, mind, and soul.

HOW TO STUDY PROVERBS

The Book of Proverbs has a universal appeal because of the diverse topics it covers. It provides the knowledge of living a moral life and how to treat others just to name a few. Knowledge itself has little value unless it is understood and then used wisely. Before studying this book of wisdom, there are several things we should understand that will help us get the most out of this timeless book.

Background of Proverbs

The Book of Proverbs is primarily ascribed to Solomon (Proverbs 1:1). However, he is not the only writer. Consider the following outline of Proverbs:

- 1 – 9 Solomon teaches his son the value of wisdom and why he should pursue it.
- 10:1 – 22:16 Contains many two-line proverbs in which Solomon gives advice on morality and many other topics.
- 22:17 – 24:34 Attributed to “Words of the wise” (22:17) and “These things also belong to the wise” (24:23). We are encouraged to obtain wisdom and to keep it.
- 25 – 29 Contains the writings of Solomon that were copied by the men of Hezekiah who lived over 200 years after Solomon, which gives practical advice about wisdom and compares the righteous with the wicked.
- 30 Written by a man named Agur. Contains thoughts about God and a plea for purity.
- 31 Written by King Lemuel as taught to him by his mother. This chapter is famous for its description and praise of a virtuous woman (10-31).

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Our outline shows that Solomon wrote most of the Book of Proverbs. When Solomon took over as king, God said he could ask for whatever he wanted (1 Kings 3:5). Solomon asked for understanding (9), which pleased God (10). God said:

1 Kings 3:11-12 ... *Because you have asked this thing, and have not asked long life for yourself, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have asked the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern justice, ¹² behold, I have done according to your words; see, I have given you a wise and understanding heart, so that there has not been anyone like you before you, nor shall any like you arise after you.*

Solomon became famous for the wisdom God blessed him with (1 Kings 4:29-31).

The Book of Proverbs only contains a small portion of the 3000 proverbs Solomon spoke (1 Kings 4:32-34). Notice a few definitions of a proverb:

“A trite maxim; a similitude; a parable” (Dictionary.com. *Easton’s 1897 Bible Dictionary*).

“proverb, parable... proverbial saying, aphorism... byword... similitude... poem ... sentences of ethical wisdom, ethical maxims” (Thayer’s Greek Lexicon (IBT) 1998-2000 [electronic version]).

Mr. Halley describes a proverb as:

“... a Short, Pithy, Axiomatic Saying, the life of which is Antithesis or Comparison. They are wholly Unconnected. Designed primarily for the Young: a form of Teaching: repetition of Practical Thoughts in a form that would stick in the mind” (Halley, Henry H. *Halley’s Bible Handbook* p. 269 Zondervan Publishing House).

The Book of Proverbs is written in the style of Hebrew poetry, which does not rhyme, but it does draw a parallelism of thought. The main three parallelism styles used are:

1. Synonymous parallelism: the thoughts of both lines express the same thought with different words. An example would be:

Proverbs 9:10 *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*

2. Antithetic parallelism: the basic thought of the first line is made clearer by a contrasting thought in the second line. An example would be:

Proverbs 11:13 *A talebearer reveals secrets, But he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter.*

3. Synthetic parallelism: The second line explains or adds something to the first line. An example would be:

Proverbs 22:6 *Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it.*

Many times the proverbs will use humorous images to make its point such as:

Proverbs 19:24 *A lazy man buries his hand in the bowl, And will not so much as bring it to his mouth again.*

This causes one to imagine a man being so lazy and void of energy that he will not even lift his hand to his mouth. Using exaggerated examples like these make the sayings more memorable. Jesus used exaggerations to make His points as well (Matthew 7:3; 19:24).

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Speaking of making things more memorable, another style used in Hebrew poetry is to make an acrostic pattern using the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet in which each line or stanza begins with the next successive letter. This style is used to describe the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31:10-31.

When interpreting and understanding the proverbs, we need to consider several guidelines:

1. One of the most important things to remember is that many of these proverbs are general truths. For example:

Proverbs 22:6 Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it.

This proverb is not saying that every child raised in the right way will not depart from the truth, but usually this is true. Even the Book of Proverbs recognizes the free will of a child and his ability to depart from the truth (Proverbs 19:27). So, keep in mind that some of the proverbs speak of general truths that will apply most of the time, but not all the time. However, there are also absolute statements such as:

Proverbs 30:5 Every word of God is pure;

2. We must consider the history and the culture during the time of Solomon to have a deeper appreciation of the text. For example, when it talks about the gates of the city it has little meaning to us, but during ancient times, the city gates were a place for trade, public forums, and general conversations, which help us gain greater insight to passages like:

Proverbs 31:23 Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land.

4. Do not build a theology from Proverbs alone. Instead, examine what the Bible says as a whole. As David wrote:

Psalm 119:160 *The sum of your word is truth.* (ESV)

5. Many of the proverbs are designed to be memorable. So, many exaggerations are used that were not intended to be taken literally such as:

Proverbs 10:25 *When the whirlwind passes by, the wicked is no more, But the righteous has an everlasting foundation.*

When we come across such proverbs, we should look for the general truth that is being taught just as we do when studying the parables of Jesus.

6. Many of the proverbs will give helpful, general advice, but due to their brevity, they do not offer many details of how to follow the advice such as:

Proverbs 16:3 *Commit your works to the LORD, and your thoughts will be established.*

The theme of Proverbs is wisdom. As we read through the proverbs, we will discover that wisdom is contrasted with foolishness many times. The righteous—who are obedient to God—are portrayed as the wise, and the unrighteous—who are disobedient, self-centered, and wicked—are portrayed as the foolish.

The purpose of Proverbs is found in Proverbs 1:2-7.

1:2-3 *To know wisdom and instruction, to perceive the words of understanding, ³ to receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, judgment, and equity;*

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These proverbs will help us to learn about wisdom so we can recognize its benefits and make it part of our lives. They will cause us to know instruction, which includes discipline, chastening, and correction. Our goal is not just to know wisdom, but to understand the words of wisdom. One could memorize all the proverbs and quote them on demand, but if they are not understood, they will not make one wise.

Before we can ever hope to gain wisdom from the proverbs, we must first be willing to receive them into our hearts and contemplate what they say. There is much for us to learn, and we should never stop learning.

1:4 To give prudence to the simple, To the young man knowledge and discretion—

Understanding the proverbs can help sharpen the wit of the gullible so they will not be easily fooled. Also, when a young man—who is still immature in wisdom—will heed the words of the wise, he will increase his knowledge and be better at making wiser choices.

1:5 A wise man will hear and increase learning, And a man of understanding will attain wise counsel,

One of the wisest men of all wants us to understand that no matter how wise we think we are, there is always room to learn more. A wise man will never think too highly of himself and will seek the wisdom of others. The moment we become too wise in our own eyes is the moment we start becoming void of understanding.

1:6 To understand a proverb and an enigma, The words of the wise and their riddles.

This synonymous parallelism teaches us that the proverbs are designed to help us understand them and their overall meaning. Sometimes the words of the wise seem like a riddle or an enigma, but if we take the time to listen and meditate on what is being said, great pearls of wisdom will be found. Jesus spoke in parables that many did not understand (Matthew 13:10-15). It was not because these wise sayings could not be understood; it was because many would not take the time to think the parables through so they could be enlightened. The proverbs challenge us to think and continue to dig deeper as we examine them from all sides.

1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, But fools despise wisdom and instruction.

This verse points out how the purpose of the Proverbs will be achieved. We must fear the Lord, which means we are to show reverence to Him knowing that He is our creator and that all wisdom comes from Him. Without Him, we would know nothing and we would be nothing. To fear the Lord will motivate us to want to learn as much as we can about Him and what He wants from us. As the contrasting line of verse 7 teaches, those who do not fear God are fools because they despise wisdom and instruction.

APPLICATION

If we want to gain a deeper understanding of God's Word and the wisdom it offers, we must dig a little deeper to find out when the book was written, who it was written to, the style it was written in, and its purpose. We must also consider if the writer is using symbolisms and exaggerations to make a point. Knowing this information will help us better understand any book of the Bible we examine. Though we are not under the authority of the Old Testament, it was written for our learning (Romans 15:4), and we can

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enhance our understanding of the New Testament by learning from the wisdom of the Old Testament. One of the most important things we should take from the Book of Proverbs is that we should never stop growing in our knowledge of the Scriptures and increasing our understanding so we can use what we learn wisely.

QUESTIONS

1. Name three parallelism styles used in the Book of Proverbs.
2. Why is it important to understand that some of the statements made in the proverbs are generally true instead of being absolute guarantees?
3. Why should we not create a theology from the Book of Proverbs alone?
4. What is the beginning point of fulfilling the purpose of the Book of Proverbs?
5. Discuss some of your favorite sayings and how you use the Book of Proverbs in your life.