



PROVERBS

The Wisdom of God as a Way of Life

The goal of Proverbs is to lead us to live well in God's world. The wisdom of God is a way of life. It is not here to give us random, disconnected bits of practical advice to apply to isolated areas of life. This is ancient wisdom to shape a way of life.

This is why we meet various characters along the way—each of whom fall along a spectrum: the righteous and wise, the simple and uncommitted, the fool, the scoffer, and—worst of all—the one who is wise in his own eyes. Proverbs is here to shape our character so we become a certain kind of person—a wise and righteous person whose life is rightly ordered in relation to God, others, and the world God made. It gives us an ethical aesthetic to know, value, and live-out in all of life.

How do we become wise? The structure of proverbs serves this purpose. Proverbs consists of several intentionally-arranged collections of wisdom. Each section builds on the previous ones, progressively advancing along the way. Think of Proverbs like an educational curriculum—with beginning, intermediate, advanced, and applied wisdom. This structure facilitates the progressive development of wisdom and character in our lives.

As we move through this progressive curriculum, we learn to see all of life with increasing clarity and wisdom. Hardly any topic is left unaddressed—money and investments, good and bad friendship, laziness and hard work, leadership, marriage, justice, emotions, and so forth.

Use the following outline to help you navigate through Proverbs to help you live well in God's world.

1. The Beginning of Wisdom (1:1–9:18)

This prepares the readers to receive the rest of the book and motivates us seek wisdom. It begins with a prologue that clarifies the purpose and the “beginning” of wisdom as the fear, or reverent trust, of the Lord (1:1–7). It consists of appeals from a father to a son to seek, receive, and treasure wisdom. We are to take the position of the son to humbly embrace wisdom. Without teachability, fearing God, and a desire for wisdom, we will not be able to receive the wisdom in the rest of Proverbs.

2. Elementary Wisdom (10:1–15:33)

This is the first collection of “the proverbs of Solomon” (10:1). This section primarily consists in clear contrasts between the righteous and wicked. These give the basic rules, principles, and patterns for how life in God's world usually works.

3. Intermediate Wisdom (16:1–22:16)

This continues the first collection of Solomon's proverbs, but moves from elementary to intermediate. Instead of clear contrasts between the righteous and wicked, we now learn exceptions to the rule and see the complexity, gray areas, and messiness of life. The general rules and patterns of life from the previous section in chapters 10–15 do not always work the way we expect.

4. Vocational Wisdom (22:17–24:34)

This is a two-part collection of “the words of the wise” (22:17; 24:23). The emphases through this section are on relationships, justice, speech, and work.

5. Advanced Wisdom (25:1–29:27)

The second collection of “the proverbs of Solomon,” which were collected by king Hezekiah's men (25:1). This is advanced wisdom, especially for leadership in the home and community. Many proverbs are clustered together to identify the characteristics of leaders, fools, sluggards, and mischief makers. It also focuses on leadership, relationships, and the use of power and authority.

6. Applied Wisdom (30:1–31:31)

This consists of two oracles: The first one by Agur emphasizes humility and the limits of human wisdom (30:1–33). The second by King Lemuel's mother shows us wisdom embodied in a composite-picture of woman of virtuous character (31:1–31).