

Day 365 - SUNDAY: February 11th

Proverbs Book Overview & Chapter 1

Proverbs 1:1-33 NKJV

The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel: To know wisdom and instruction, To perceive the words of understanding, To receive the instruction of wisdom, Justice, judgment, and equity; To give prudence to the simple, To the young man knowledge and discretion— A wise man will hear and increase learning, And a man of understanding will attain wise counsel, To understand a proverb and an enigma, The words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, But fools despise wisdom and instruction. My son, hear the instruction of your father, And do not forsake the law of your mother; For they will be a graceful ornament on your head, And chains about your neck. My son, if sinners entice you, Do not consent. If they say, "Come with us, Let us lie in wait to shed blood; Let us lurk secretly for the innocent without cause; Let us swallow them alive like Sheol, And whole, like those who go down to the Pit; We shall find all kinds of precious possessions, We shall fill our houses with spoil; Cast in your lot among us, Let us all have one purse"— My son, do not walk in the way with them, Keep your foot from their path; For their feet run to evil, And they make haste to shed blood. Surely, in vain the net is spread In the sight of any bird; But they lie in wait for their own blood, They lurk secretly for their own lives. So are the ways of everyone who is greedy for gain; It takes away the life of its owners. Wisdom calls aloud outside; She raises her voice in the open squares. She cries out in the chief concourses, At the openings of the gates in the city She speaks her words: "How long, you simple ones, will you love simplicity? For scorners delight in their scorning, And fools hate knowledge. Turn at my rebuke; Surely I will pour out my

spirit on you; I will make my words known to you. Because I have called and you refused, I have stretched out my hand and no one regarded, Because you disdained all my counsel, And would have none of my rebuke, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your terror comes, When your terror comes like a storm, And your destruction comes like a whirlwind, When distress and anguish come upon you. "Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; They will seek me diligently, but they will not find me. Because they hated knowledge And did not choose the fear of the LORD, They would have none of my counsel And despised my every rebuke. Therefore they shall eat the fruit of their own way, And be filled to the full with their own fancies. For the turning away of the simple will slay them, And the complacency of fools will destroy them; But whoever listens to me will dwell safely, And will be secure, without fear of evil."

Daily Deep Dive:

The UCG reading plan states: "Second, following Psalms, in the Hebrew arrangement of the Writings section of the Old Testament is the premier example of wisdom literature in Scripture--the book of Proverbs. The Hebrew Title of the book, based on the first verse, is *Mishle Shelomoh*, "Proverbs of Solomon." The Greek title used in the Septuagint is a translation of this: *Paroimiai Salomontos*. As we will consider further, the Greek word here is also the word for "parables." The Latin title, *Liber Proverbiorum*, brings us closer to the English title we use today. The early rabbinical writings called Proverbs *Sepher Hokhmah*, "Book of Wisdom," after its principal subject.

Just what is a proverb? In modern parlance the word denotes a memorable short saying summarizing a time-tested truth—also known as an aphorism, adage, maxim, epigram or byword. One commentator explains: "Proverbs are pithy statements that

summarize in a few choice words practical truths relating to some aspect of everyday life. The Spanish novelist Cervantes defined a proverb as ‘a short sentence based on long experience.’ From a literary point of view, that isn’t a bad definition. Some people think that our English word *proverb* comes from the Latin *proverbium*, which means ‘a set of words put forth,’ or, ‘a saying supporting a point.’ Or, it may come from the Latin *pro* (‘instead of,’ ‘on behalf of’) and *verba* (‘words’); that is, a short statement that takes the place of many words. The proverb ‘Short reckonings make long friendships’ comes across with more power than a lecture on forgiving your friends” (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Skillful: An Old Testament Study—Proverbs: Tapping God’s Guidebook to Fulfillment*, 2004, p. 14).

Yet we should take care here to note that the Hebrew word translated “proverb,” *mashal* (for which *mishle* is the plural), is considerably broader than this. It corresponds to our idea of a proverb, a popular short saying, in some passages (see 1 Samuel 10:12; 1 Samuel 24:13). Yet it can also refer to a prophetic discourse (see Numbers 23:7, Numbers 23:18), a taunt (see Isaiah 14:4; Micah 2:4; Habakkuk 2:6), a parable or allegory (see Ezekiel 17:2; Ezekiel 20:49; Ezekiel 24:3-5), or the longer discourse sections in Job (see Job 27:1; Job 29:1). The basic meaning of the Hebrew word *mashal* is “comparison,” “similarity” or “parallel.” Many of the short sayings in the book of Proverbs are comparisons or contrasts (see Proverbs 11:22; Proverbs 25:25; Proverbs 26:6-9). Sometimes these are presented with the word “better” (see Proverbs 15:16-17; Proverbs 16:19, Proverbs 16:32; Proverbs 17:1; Proverbs 19:1). But we should recognize that, unlike the latter part of the book, chapters 1–9 consist not mainly of short sayings but of lengthier discourses. Nevertheless,

rather powerful metaphoric imagery is employed in these opening chapters— with wisdom and folly personified as two very different women. Such metaphoric discourses could perhaps fall within the meaning of the Hebrew term *mashal*. It may be that the general idea is illustrative sayings—which would include all of the above. Yet in the book of Proverbs, the meaning may more specifically refer to the compact sayings—as the section heading in Proverbs 10:1 (following the introductory chapters 1–9) seems to commence the proverbs of Solomon without an “also” as in Proverbs 25:1 (though some argue that this is because chapters 1-9 were a later addition, which seems unlikely).

As wisdom literature, the proverbs here have a didactic or instructive purpose (see Proverbs 1:1-7)—these being “the words of the wise” (Proverbs 1:6). Indeed, there were three classes of teachers in ancient Israel. Note Jeremiah 18:18: “Then they said, ‘Come and let us devise plans against Jeremiah; for the *law* shall not perish from the *priest*, nor *counsel* from the *wise*, nor the *word* from the *prophet*.’” Also Ezekiel 7:26: “Then they will seek a *vision* from a *prophet*; but the *law* will perish from the *priest*, and *counsel* from the *elders*.” Besides the priests who taught the people God’s law and the prophets who communicated special messages from God, the people also learned from the “wise” or “elders” who gave them counsel on applying God’s principles and navigating their way through life. The seal of divine approval on such wisdom was its harmony with God’s laws and prophetic scriptures. Of course, in the case of the book of Proverbs, there is no question as to its divine warrant since it is now clearly part of the Bible, God’s Word. Yet even when compiled, the wisdom of its human author was known to have come from God.

In 1 Kings 3, we read how King Solomon received his great wisdom. When chosen to succeed his father David as king, Solomon humbly asked God to grant him wisdom so that he might be a good king in governing God's people Israel: "Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?" (verse 9). God was very pleased with Solomon's humble and serving attitude. Notice His response: "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" (verse 12). Later in 1 Kings 4 we read: "And God gave Solomon wisdom and exceedingly great understanding and largeness of heart like the sand on the seashore. Thus Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the men of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men...and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs, and his songs were one thousand and five.... And men of all nations, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom, came to hear the wisdom of Solomon" (verses 29-34).

The fact that Solomon *spoke* 3,000 proverbs does not mean that all originated with him. No doubt many were his creations. But others he collected, perhaps even from surrounding cultures, and some he edited and compiled into this written set. As we are told in the book of Ecclesiastes: "Because the Preacher [most likely Solomon] was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes, he *pondered* and *sought out* and *set in order* many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find acceptable words; and what was written was upright—words of truth" (Ecclesiastes 12:9-10). Some think Solomon's plunge into uncontrolled polygamy and later idolatry

disqualifies him from having written the book of Proverbs. But clearly God inspired his great wisdom and what he wrote—despite Solomon’s eventual choices to ignore what he knew to be right. Indeed, considering the other biblical testimony here, who better than Solomon to have put together the premier wisdom text?

Solomon’s name appears at the beginning of three sections of the book of Proverbs: in Proverbs 1:1 at the beginning of chapters 1–9; in Proverbs 10:1 at the beginning of 10:1–22:16; and in Proverbs 25:1 at the beginning of chapters 25–29. Let’s note the parts of the book in order of arrangement:

1. Proverbs 1:1-7 Title and Purpose Statement
2. Proverbs 1:8–9:18 Prologue (father’s exhortative discourses, wisdom personified)
3. Proverbs 10:1–22:16 Proverbs of Solomon (Major Collection)
4. Proverbs 22:17–24:22 Words of the Wise
5. Proverbs 24:23-34 Further Words of the Wise
6. Proverbs 25:1–29:27 Further Proverbs of Solomon (Hezekiah’s Collection)
7. Proverbs 30:1-33 Words of Agur

8. Proverbs 31:1-9 Words of King Lemuel From His Mother

9. Proverbs 31:10-31 Epilogue (Virtuous Wife)

(Sometimes section 1 above is referred to as a prologue and section 2 is called an introduction. Others reverse these designations. And still others apply both terms to both sections together. It is true that both are really part of the same section, so that sections 1 and 2 could be assigned the same number. Also, sections 8 and 9 are often grouped together, given that 9, the book’s epilogue, has no separate attribution. This would yield a total of seven sections, corresponding to the distinct attribution at the beginning of each. Still, the authorship of the epilogue is uncertain.)

Many argue that the attribution to Solomon in Proverbs 1:1 concerns the whole work rather than specifically chapters 1–9. This seems likely, since, as mentioned earlier, Proverbs 10:1 does not have the word “also” like Proverbs 25:1 does. However, that could be because Proverbs 10:1 begins the section of compact proverbial sayings in contrast to the preceding longer discourses. As further noted earlier, some claim that chapters 1–9 constitute a later addition to the book of Proverbs written by someone other than Solomon. Yet the attribution to Solomon in 1:1 would then seem rather odd—not applying to any material for nine chapters. Thus, even though the title in Proverbs 1:1 probably refers to the book as a whole, the absence of any other attribution at the beginning of chapters 1–9 most reasonably implies that Solomon is the one behind this lengthy prologue or introduction.

Out of the large number of proverbs Solomon spoke, he selected for the book of Proverbs’ core collection bearing his name (10:1–22:16) the comparatively small number of 375 (one proverb per verse/line). Interestingly, this number corresponds to the numerical value of Solomon’s name. His name in Hebrew, Shelomoh, is written with four Hebrew consonants, each of which corresponds to a number: *shin* (300) + *lamed* (30) + *mem* (40) + *he* (5) = 375.

A later collection of Solomonic proverbs (Proverbs 25–29) was added by “the men of Hezekiah king of Judah” (Proverbs 25:1). Hezekiah, a righteous king, directed this work—perhaps with the guidance of the prophets who were contemporary with him, Isaiah and Micah. We are not told where these were copied from, but it may have been from a book mentioned in 1 Kings 11:41: “Now the rest of the acts of Solomon, all that he did, *and his wisdom,*

are they not written in the *book of the acts of Solomon*?" Some contend that the number of proverbs in this section (which is not always one per verse) likewise corresponds to the numerical value of Hezekiah's name. His name is variously spelled, but in Proverbs 25:1 the form is *Hsqyh*: *heth* (8) + *zayin* (7) + *qoph* (100) + *yod* (10) + *he* (5) = 130. The exact number of proverbs in this section is not clear, as some may be conjoined, but this number is perhaps possible. It is certainly close. Some contend that Hezekiah's name, as in other passages, should be counted with a preceding *yod* (valued at 10), yielding a total of 140—and they argue that there are 140 verse lines in this collection that should be counted instead of literary units or sayings.

We do not know when the other collections in the book were included—these being the two from the “wise” (Proverbs 22:17–24:22; Proverbs 24:23-34) and that of Agur (Proverbs 30:1-33) and of Lemuel (Proverbs 31:1-9), of which, as noted above, the epilogue about the virtuous wife (Proverbs 31:10-31) may or may not be part. Since none of these sections include a note about scribal copying like the Hezekiah collection, it may be that these others were all part of Solomon's original compilation. As for Agur and Lemuel, we do not know who they are. Some consider these names to be pseudonyms for Solomon, but this is not provable and seems unlikely given the other clear attributions. We will further consider this matter later.

Other numerical factors may have guided the final editorial work on the book. As commentator Patrick Skehan notes: “The title in Proverbs 1:1 alleges ‘Proverbs of Solomon (375), son of David ($d = 4 + w = 6 + d = 4$, or 14 in all), king of Israel.’ Now since *Ysr'el* has the numerical value ($y = 10 + s = 300 + r = 200 + ' = 1 + l = 30$) 541, the names in Proverbs 1:1 have a value of 375

+ 14 + 541, or 930, the number of lines in the book” (*Studies in Israelite Poetry and Wisdom*, The Catholic Biblical Quarterly—Monograph Series I, 1971, p. 44). The same commentator argues that the book is constructed as the “house of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:1), arranged in a numeric pattern corresponding to the temple of Solomon. “Skehan’s theory is intriguing, but most scholars remain unconvinced of its validity. Its very complexity and the peculiar way some passages are combined give the theory a contrived look” (*New American Commentary*, introduction to Proverbs, p. 48). Time and space limitations prevent further examination of this idea here.

Parallels From Egypt and Mesopotamia

Agreeing with an early compilation by Solomon himself, respected scholar Kenneth Kitchen’s structural analysis of Proverbs “indicates that the Book of Solomon (Proverbs 1–24) was written as a unified text at the beginning of the first millennium B.C. Even apart from that work, however, the older criteria for dating the sections of Proverbs are inappropriate. The lengthy wisdom discourses and the personification of wisdom in Proverbs 1–9, once regarded as proofs of the late origin of those chapters, are now acknowledged to be paralleled in Egyptian literature” (NAC, p. 51). Indeed, there are a number of parallels in the book of Proverbs with similar wisdom literature in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.

There are good reasons to give some consideration to this fact and take a look at such literature. As *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* explains in its introduction to Proverbs: “This literary background is helpful to understanding the biblical book. First, it provides help in understanding the forms of wisdom literature—proverbs, maxims, fables, riddles, allegories, and instructions.

Second, it indicates the antiquity of the forms used in the Bible, especially Proverbs 1–9, which was once considered to be the latest form. But it now can be demonstrated that the literary proverb of two lines may be as old as the Sumerian proverbs, and that collected instructions may be as ancient as the Old Kingdom of Egypt.” Of course, such wisdom literature was based on human observation in a pagan setting without divine sanction. Yet some elements of this literature were valid and may have, through God’s direction, been edited to fit in the collection of the book of Proverbs, as we will see. On the other hand, the biblical proverbs may also have influenced foreign literature. We will consider these issues after briefly taking note of some of the foreign wisdom instruction.

Old Kingdom Egypt gives us “the ‘Instruction of Kagemni’ and the ‘Instruction of Ptah-hotep’ (2450 B.C. [?]), which advise the proper decorum for a court official. Like Proverbs, Ptah-hotep counsels on persuasive speech: ‘Good speech is more hidden than the emerald, but it may be found with maidservants at the grindstones’.... He further warns against going after a woman like a fool, for ‘one attains death through knowing her” (same note). The same work says: “When you are guest at the table of one who is greater than you then take what he gives you, as they serve it before you. Do not look at what lies before him, but always look only at what lies before you” (compare Proverbs 23:1).

Also from the Egyptian Old Kingdom, “the ‘Instruction of Merikare’ (2160-2040 B.C) records a monarch’s advice for his son on the wise qualities needed by a king, including this saying: ‘The tongue is a sword...and speech is more valorous than any fighting” (*Expositor’s*, introduction to Proverbs).

From the Egyptian New Kingdom we have the “Instructions of Anii.”

“Like the book of Proverbs, Anii:

- exhorts readers to avoid beer drinking and warns about the disgrace of public drunkenness (see Proverbs 20:1).
- asserts that an individual should avoid the company of brawlers and violent men (see v. 3).
- advises against taking vengeance, urging the reader instead to seek divine help (cf. v. 22).
- warns the reader to stay away from the ‘strange woman,’ the prostitute or adulteress (vv. [16; 22:14;] 23[:27]-35)” (“The Instructions of Anii,” *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, sidebar on Proverbs 20, p. 990).

From early Mesopotamia comes the “Instruction of Shuruppak” (ca. 2000 B.C.), which “records the advice of a king to his son Ziusudra, the hero of the flood in the Sumerian version. For example, it says, ‘My son, let me give you instructions, may you pay attention to them,’ and ‘{My} son, do not sit {alone} in a {chamber} with someone’s wife.’ The ‘Counsels of Wisdom’ (c. 1500-1000 B.C.) are a collection of moral exhortations about avoiding bad company and careless speech, being kind to the needy, and living in harmony with one’s neighbor and in loyalty to the king. For example, it says, ‘Do not return evil to your adversary; Requite with kindness the one who does evil to you, / Maintain justice for your enemy”’ (*Expositor’s*, introduction to Proverbs).

Solomon may well have studied such literature, given the cosmopolitan nature of his kingdom and his renowned pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. Considering his royal education and position as king, he likely was able to speak and read the

languages of surrounding kingdoms. Scripture, as we've seen, even mentions the wisdom of the East and of Egypt, which was surpassed by Solomon (see 1 Kings 4:30; compare Daniel 1:4, Daniel 1:17, Daniel 1:20). Solomon was closely allied to Egypt, being married to the pharaoh's daughter. Many Egyptian cultural influences have been discovered in archaeological finds in Jerusalem dating to Solomon's time.

Some later works in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt could reflect earlier wisdom in nations that Solomon borrowed from. On the other hand, these works could just as easily reflect wisdom that came to some extent *from* Solomon—as his wisdom was famous throughout the Middle East during his reign. “The ‘Words of Ahiqar’ (700-670 B.C.) is a collection of proverbs, riddles, short fables, and religious observations by a court official for the Assyrian kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon, giving advice on disciplining children, guarding the tongue, respecting secrets, and being circumspect in dealing with the king. For example, it says, ‘Withhold not thy son from the rod’ (...cf. Proverbs 13:24); and ‘I have lifted sand, and I have carried salt; but there is naught which is heavier than {grief}’ (...cf. Proverbs 27:3)” (same note).

And from later in Egypt there is the “Instruction of Ankhsheshonqy” (ca. 400-300 B.C.), “a large collection of about five hundred sayings and precepts like those in the Book of Proverbs that reflect the practical and religious concerns of the community. But they do not have the poetic parallelism characteristic of Hebrew proverbs. For example, their instructions include: ‘Do not go to your brother if you are in trouble, go to your friend’ (cf. Proverbs 27:10); and ‘Better {to have} a statue for a son than a fool’ (cf. Proverbs 17:21)” (same note).

The strongest parallels with the book of Proverbs are to be found in the Egyptian New Kingdom “Instruction of Amenemope” (sometimes written as Amen-em-opet). A number of its statements correspond closely to the “Sayings of the Wise” in Proverbs 22:17–23:11. “For example, the instructions include these: ‘Do not associate to thyself the heated man, / Nor visit him for conversation’ (...cf. Proverbs 22:24); ‘Do not strain to seek an excess, / When thy needs are safe for thee. / If riches are brought to thee by robbery.... / (Or) they have made themselves wings like geese / And are flown away to the heavens’ (...cf. Prov 23:4-5)” (same note). The latter parallel is uncanny. Proverbs 23:4-5 says: “Do not overwork to be rich.... Will you set your eyes on that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away like an eagle toward heaven.” We will examine further parallels with Amenemope later. There is some debate over who influenced whom here. Most scholars take Amenemope to predate Solomon, in which case Solomon could have borrowed from the Egyptian work—though the Egyptian work could just as well have drawn on earlier Hebrew wisdom that Solomon also borrowed from. However, some argue that Amenemope was composed later than Solomon.

We should realize that borrowing or editing some sayings in use at the time does not signal approval of surrounding cultures—nor does it take away from the inspiration of Solomon’s work. As commentator Tremper Longman points out: “Study of the similarities between the advice given in the biblical book and ancient Near Eastern wisdom...makes concrete what we read in 1 Kings 4, that the sages of Israel lived and studied in an international context. It is always dicey to be dogmatic about specific borrowings, but there is little doubt that Israel’s wise

teachers read, understood, adapted, and appropriated the wisdom of their (pagan!) neighbors. Does this tell us something about how we should view our own, non-Christian culture, as well as other cultures worldwide? Many Christians react strongly against today's culture and the literature it produces—reading only Christian literature, going only to Christian schools, avoiding movies, and so forth. Certainly the prophets of Israel issued important warnings about the seductive power of pagan culture. The sages, though, are the counterbalance. They are a model of thoughtful observers, reflecting on the world around them [just as the apostle Paul later quoted from pagan literature to make certain points]. Perhaps we should be better observers ourselves. Though the sages observed and appropriated, they never simply or uncritically borrowed ideas from the broader cultural setting. Rather they adapted them to their own religious values.... If sages observed a truth in Egyptian wisdom, they understood it to be a truth of Yahweh" (*How to Read Proverbs*, 2002, p. 77). And *Expositor's* notes: "Whatever the Spirit of God inspired the ancient writers to include became a part of the Word of the Lord. Such inclusions then took on a new and greater meaning when they formed part of Scripture; in a word, they became authoritative and binding, part of the communication of the divine will" (introduction to Proverbs).

Indeed, such wisdom was not left to stand on its own but was placed in subordination to the fact that true knowledge and wisdom begin with the fear of the Lord (see Proverbs 1:7; Proverbs 9:10). "The words 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge' (Proverbs 1:7) set the record straight, so to speak. This is the foundation on which all other wise sayings stand. It is the Book of Proverbs' central idea: Fear of the Lord

motivates us to obey God's commandments, and obedience to them constitutes true wisdom" (*The Nelson Study Bible*, introduction to Proverbs). Indeed, Proverbs 1:7, which concludes the purpose statement of the book and commences the introductory instruction, is the very first sentence proverb or compact saying in the book—contrasting the way to right knowledge through godly fear with the choice of fools to reject wisdom and instruction. (Compared to later sections of the book, the first nine chapters constituting the introduction contain relatively few such maxims.)

“To Know Wisdom and Instruction”

Just what is wisdom? The book of Proverbs was written so that others would know it (Proverbs 1:2). “Descriptions of wisdom take different shape in different Old Testament contexts. In some, wisdom is knowledge related to a technical skill—for example, Bezalel's skill in crafting artistic designs with silver and gold, stone, and wood (Exodus 31:3). In other contexts, wisdom refers more to general knowledge learned from experience, especially from observation of the creation—for example, the lowly ant models diligence and foresight (Proverbs 6:6-8). In general, we can say that wisdom involves knowing what to do in a given situation; skill in crafts or skill in living well both require that a person has learned how to ‘do the right thing’” (Paul Koptak, *The NIV Application Commentary: Proverbs*, 2003, introduction to Proverbs, pp. 38-39).

Wisdom in the book of Proverbs generally signifies moral discernment between righteousness and evil as well as skill in the proper conduct of the business of life. Wisdom implies the correct *application* of knowledge and understanding. The *New Open Bible* states in its introduction to the book: “The words

‘wisdom’ and ‘instruction’ in 1:2 complement each other because *wisdom* (*hokhmah*) means ‘skill’ and *instruction* (*musar* [the noun form of *yasar*]) means ‘discipline’ [or ‘correction’]. No skill is perfected without discipline.... Proverbs deals with the most fundamental skill of all: practical righteousness before God in every area of life.”

There are other frequently occurring Hebrew terms we should note up front:

<i>bin</i>	understanding (intellectual ability to discern truth and error)
<i>da’at</i>	knowledge (possession of factual information)
<i>skal</i>	wise perception and dealing (being insightful or successful)
<i>mezimma</i>	discretion (discernment to differentiate the right way to proceed)
<i>’orma</i>	prudence (ability to reason through situations)
<i>leqakh</i>	learning (the root means to grasp or acquire, here mentally)
<i>tachbullah</i>	counsel (the root means to steer a ship, thus guidance to direct one’s life)
<i>peti</i>	simple (uninformed, immature, aimless, naïve, gullible)
<i>kesil</i>	<i>fool</i> (evil but also an individual who rejects obvious truth and despises wise words)
<i>lason</i>	scorner (individual who seeks to make trouble for others)

The book of Proverbs is all about navigating between right and wrong choices. “Proverbs, if nothing else, zeroes in on the choices we face, and in recommending one way over another, it describes the kind of persons we can become and ought to be....

The proverbs do not give directions for what to do in every situation; instead, they present the qualities of character that

guide us in the many decisions we will face in life” (*NIV Application Commentary*, introduction to Proverbs, p. 46).

The book is particularly geared to young people so they may learn from the experiences of others recorded here—but valuable and useful for *everyone*. “According to the prologue (Proverbs 1:1-7), Proverbs was written to give ‘prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young’ (Proverbs 1:4), and to make the wise even wiser (Proverbs 1:5). The frequent references to ‘my son(s)’ (Proverbs 1:8, 10; Proverbs 2:1; Proverbs 3:1; Proverbs 4:1; Proverbs 5:1) emphasize instructing the young and guiding them in a way of life that yields rewarding ends” (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, introduction to Proverbs). “In the final analysis,” notes commentator Longman, “the book of Proverbs is for everyone—but with one notable exception. The fool is excluded. Perhaps it would be better to say that fools exclude themselves.... The final verse of the prologue [i.e., of the opening purpose statement] (Proverbs 1:7) gives what has been called the motto of the book: ‘The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.’... By definition, fools cannot participate in wisdom because they reject God” (p. 20).

The same commentator further explains that the metaphoric imagery presented in the lengthy introduction of the book necessitates that a young man be the one addressed: “In summary, Proverbs 1–9 teaches that there are two paths: one that is right and leads to life, and one that is wrong and leads to death. The son is walking the path of life, and the father and Wisdom are warning him of the dangers he will encounter as well as the encouragement he will find.... Traps, snares, stumbling, enemies on the dark side; God on the side of life. But the most important people encountered along the way—and this explains

why we need to understand that the addressee is a man—are two women: Woman Wisdom and the dark figure of Woman Folly” (p. 27).

Likewise, the *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* points out: “In the initial cycle of instruction (Proverbs 1:8–9:18) the writer urges the young man to choose the way of wisdom (that leads to life) and shun the ways of folly (that, however tempting they may be, lead to death). The author chooses two prime exemplifications of folly to give concreteness to his exhortations: (1) to get ahead in the world by exploiting (even oppressing) others rather than by diligent and honest labor; and (2) to find sexual pleasure outside the bonds and responsibilities of marriage. Temptation to the one comes from the young man’s male peers (Proverbs 1:10-19); temptation to the other comes from the adulterous woman (ch. 5; Proverbs 6:20-35; ch. 7). Together, these two temptations illustrate the pervasiveness and power of the allurements to folly that the young man will face in life and must be prepared to resist.... The second especially functions here as illustrative and emblematic of the appeal of Lady Folly” (introduction to Proverbs).

Understanding the figurative parallels here, it is clear that women can profit from the instruction given in this introduction as well. The opening discourses are “strikingly organized. Beginning (Proverbs 1:8-33) and ending (chs. 8–9) with direct enticements and appeals, the main body of the discourses is made up of two nicely balanced sections, one devoted to the commendation of wisdom (chs. 2–4) and the other to warnings against folly (chs. 5–7)” (ibid.). *Expositor’s* notes that “this section runs in cycles: the purpose of Proverbs is to give wisdom (Proverbs 2:1–4:27), but folly may prevent one from seeking it (Proverbs 5:1–6:19); there are advantages to finding wisdom (Proverbs 6:20–9:12), but folly

may prevent this too (Proverbs 9:13-18)” (introduction to Proverbs).

Following the introduction, chapter 10 commences the concentration of short sentence proverbs forming the main collections of the book—there being only few such aphorisms scattered throughout the introductory discourses (the first being Proverbs 1:7, as we’ve seen). When we reach chapter 10 in our reading, we will note the various forms of these proverbs. There is a clear relation, we should observe, between Proverbs and the law of God—as Proverbs affirms the wisdom of keeping God’s law and the folly of breaking or ignoring it. This sometimes comes in the form of direct commands in the proverbs, these being a form of instruction. For example, Deuteronomy says, “You shall not remove your neighbor’s landmark” (Deuteronomy 19:14) and “cursed is the one who moves his neighbor’s landmark” (Deuteronomy 27:17). Likewise, Proverbs says, “Do not remove the ancient landmark” (Proverbs 22:28; Proverbs 23:10). At other times the relationship is more illustrative. The Fifth Commandment says, “Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16). Proverbs states, “A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is the grief of his mother” (10:1). The Eighth Commandment says, “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15; Deuteronomy 5:19). Proverbs states, “Ill-gotten treasures are of no value; but righteousness delivers from death” (10:2, NIV). Of course, the desired conduct is still clear. Such is the nature of wisdom literature.

The NIV Application Commentary says: “One might go a little farther and say that experience and observation together persuade the wise of the truth of *torah* [God’s law or teaching]. It is torah tested in the crucible of experience, and one can draw

from that crucible examples of how wisdom works in real life.

Examples of wisdom in Proverbs, but also in Job, Ecclesiastes, a number of the psalms, and perhaps even the Song of Songs, join together to say: See, this way of life works—sometimes in ways we did not expect (see Job and Ecclesiastes)—and one need not be afraid to bring the teaching of *torah* to experience to be tested by it. In wisdom literature the rule of God described in the *torah* takes on personal suffering (Job), the contradictions of life (Ecclesiastes), and the presence of evil in this world (Proverbs) and affirms that God’s instructions can be trusted. Experience ultimately will not contradict them” (pp. 39- 41).

The mechanics of these principles leading to positive or negative outcomes may involve God’s direct intervention or simply follow a natural course. *The New American Commentary* points out:

“Regarding the relationship between wisdom and the Torah, one must compare first of all the teaching of Proverbs on retribution with that found in Deuteronomy. Both strongly emphasize the concepts of retribution and reward. In both, just or right activity produces life and peace, whereas evil deeds end in self-destruction. On the other hand, in Deuteronomy the rewards or retributions come directly from the hand of God as he deals with his people according to the terms of the covenant. Proverbs, however, views the respective benefits and sorrows of good and evil not so much as direct acts of God as the natural and almost automatic results of certain actions” (pp. 25-26).

On this note we should realize that Proverbs does not support the misguided theology held by Job’s friends in the book of Job—the idea that physical blessings in life are proof of righteousness and suffering is proof of sinfulness. It may seem that way from numerous short sayings—or even that the sayings are

contradictory, since some show the righteous living well and some show the sinful living well for the time being. The same commentary properly notes: “Proverbs does not support the often alleged maxim that the Israelites believed that the rich are righteous and favored by God but the poor are sinners and under his punishment. This assessment is a poor caricature of biblical wisdom. The problem here is not with the Bible but with our failure to grasp the hermeneutics [interpretive methods] of wisdom literature. By its very nature and purpose, wisdom emphasizes the general truth over some specific cases and, being a work of instruction, frames its teachings in short, pithy statements without excessive qualification. It is not that the wisdom writers did not know that life was complex and full of exceptions, but dwelling on those cases would have distracted attention from their didactic [i.e., teaching] purposes. It is general truth that those who fear God and live with diligence and integrity will have lives that are prosperous and peaceful but that those who are lazy and untrustworthy ultimately destroy themselves. And general truths are the stock in trade of Proverbs” (p. 57).

Commentator Wiersbe further notes: “Hebrew proverbs are generalized statements of what is usually true in life, and they must not be treated like promises. ‘A friend loves at all times’ (Proverbs 17:17, NKJV), but sometimes even the most devoted friends may have disagreements [or fail to have proper care for one another]. ‘A soft answer turns away wrath’ (Proverbs 15:1, NKJV) in most instances, but our Lord’s lamblike gentleness didn’t deliver Him from shame and suffering. The assurance of life for the obedient is given often (Proverbs 3:2, Proverbs 3:22; Proverbs 4:10, Proverbs 4:22; Proverbs 8:35; Proverbs 9:11; Proverbs 10:27; Proverbs 12:28; Proverbs 13:14; Proverbs 14:27;

Proverbs 19:23; Proverbs 21:21; Proverbs 22:4) and generally speaking, this is true. Obedient believers will care for their bodies and minds and avoid substances and practices that destroy, but some godly saints have died very young while more than one godless rebel has had a long life.... 'The righteous man is rescued from trouble, and it comes on the wicked instead' (Proverbs 11:8, NIV) certainly happened to Mordecai (Esther 7) and Daniel (Daniel 6), but...Christian martyrs testify to the fact that the statement isn't an absolute in this life. In fact, in Psalm 73, Asaph concludes that the wicked get the upper hand in this world, but the godly have their reward in eternity. The Book of Proverbs has little to say about the life to come; it focuses on this present life and gives guidelines for making wise decisions that help to produce a satisfying life" (p. 22). Of course, the promises of eternity for the righteous are to be understood in a scriptural context and are to be kept in mind as a given while reading the proverbs.

The NIV Application Commentary cautions: "We may need to unlearn the idea that Proverbs is a book of principles that allow us to predict or even control how life will turn out, a collection of promises that we can cash in like coupons.... Solomon and the sages who followed him never claimed that their observations were promises that God was duty-bound to fulfill. They understood that the wicked sometimes prosper for a time and that the righteous often suffer, but they also knew that God does not stop being God when circumstances seem to point the other way. Instead, these writings show us how life in this God-created universe works so we can work with it and not against it" (p. 43). On this point, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books* comments: "It is inappropriate to treat the proverbs of this

book as promises. They are theological and pragmatic principles.... If, of course, other genres of Holy Scripture set forth that truth [expressed in a particular proverb] as a promise, then it is appropriate to view the proverb in that manner, while acknowledging that the promissory element does not originate with proverbs. That is not their purpose” (Hassel Bullock, 1988, p. 162).

Moreover, we should realize that particular proverbs are sometimes situation-sensitive and not always universally applicable. This explains how we can have proverbs that seem directly contradictory. Perhaps the best illustration of this is Proverbs 26:4-5, where we are told: “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.” So do we answer a fool or not? Wisdom is discerning that it depends on the situation. We will see more on these particular verses in a moment. But the same can be said of more modern English proverbs. Consider “Many hands make light work” versus “Too many cooks spoil the broth.” Which maxim is true? They both are—but each fits a different situation. Or “Look before you leap” versus “He who hesitates is lost.” We find the same principle at work here. Sometimes people need to be more cautious, but in other situations they could be *too* cautious. Wisdom, we should realize, is not only knowing such principles, but knowing when a particular principle is applicable.

Commentator Longman puts it well: “Proverbs are not magical words that if memorized and applied in a mechanical way automatically lead to success and happiness. Consider Proverbs 26:7 and 9: ‘A proverb in the mouth of a fool is as useless as a paralyzed leg.... A proverb in the mouth of a fool is like a

thornbush brandished by a drunk.’ These two proverbs say it takes a wise person to activate the teaching of a proverb correctly. A wise person is one who is sensitive to the right time and place. The fool applies a proverb heedless of its fitness for the situation. The two quoted proverbs are pointed in their imagery. A paralyzed leg does not help the person walk, so a proverb does not help a fool act wisely. According to the second saying, a fool’s use of a proverb may be worse than ineffective, it may even be dangerous. Using a thornbush as a weapon would hurt the wielder as well as the one being struck. So a proverb must be applied at the right time and in the right situation. The wise person is one who can do this effectively” (p. 50).

He further adds: “Wisdom, then, is not a matter of memorizing proverbs and applying them mechanically and absolutely.

Wisdom is knowing the right time and the right circumstances to apply the right principle to the right person. Returning to the ‘contradictory’ proverbs about whether or not to answer a fool (Proverbs 26:4-5), we see now that the wise person must, to put it baldly, know what kind of fool he or she is dealing with. Is this a fool who will not learn and will simply sap time and energy from the wise person? If so, then don’t bother answering. However, if this is a fool who can learn, and our not answering will lead to worse problems, then by all means, answer. In a word, proverbs are principles are generally true, not immutable laws. Bearing this in mind makes a world of difference when reading the proverbs. Someone reading Proverbs 23:13-14 [about not failing to beat a child with a rod for correction]...and having a mechanical view of the application of the proverbs, may well end up with a dangerous view of parenting.... But this is not a law. It is a general principle that encourages those who are reluctant to use a form of

discipline by telling them that it is permissible and even helpful for delivering a child from behavior that may result in premature death” (pp. 56-57). As with the former situation, it is important to discern what action the circumstance calls for.

The book of Proverbs, as with all of Scripture, is vital to living the Christian life. It is quoted nine times in the New Testament: Romans 3:15; Romans 12:16, Romans 12:20 (Proverbs 1:16; Proverbs 3:7; Proverbs 25:21-22); Hebrews 12:5-6 (Proverbs 3:11-12); James 4:6, James 4:13-14 (Proverbs 3:34; Proverbs 27:1); 1 Peter 2:17; 1 Peter 4:8, 1 Peter 4:18 (Proverbs 24:21; Proverbs 10:12; Proverbs 11:31); 2 Peter 2:22 (Proverbs 26:11). Indeed, the book points to the ultimate wisdom that is found in Christ. Jesus was the preeminent wisdom teacher. He taught with parables—and the Greek word *parabole* was, as noted earlier, used to translate the Hebrew *mashal* (the word translated “proverb” in English). In Luke 11:31 He spoke of the wisdom of Solomon and declared Himself *greater* than Solomon. But more than that, Jesus is the very embodiment of wisdom—“in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). And this was for our benefit: “But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and justification and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30; compare verses 22-24). It is through Christ that we are made truly wise. Of course, that wisdom is reflected in Proverbs, as it is in all Scripture.

Finally, this wonderful trove of wisdom provides God’s people with a crucial guide to navigating the various situations of life. As the *Soncino Commentary’s* introduction to Proverbs notes: “The comprehensiveness of outlook is indeed remarkable. No phase of human relationship seems to be overlooked. The king on his

throne, the tradesman in his store and the farmer in the field, husband and wife and child, all receive wholesome instruction and exhortation. Advice is tendered on the treatment of friends, the poor, the rearing of children, the snares which lurk in the path of youth, the perils of overconfidence and self-commitment by standing surety for others. These and other contingencies provide occasion for shrewd counsel, based upon the central doctrine that wisdom is a tree of *life to them that lay hold on her, and happy is every one that holdeth her fast* ([3].18).” Let us all strive with Christ’s help to do just that.

Avoid Evil Counsel and Listen to Wisdom

Instruction begins with the words “My son” (verse 8)—and we see this several other times throughout the opening discourses of the book. Some see this address as formulaic of a wisdom teacher speaking to a disciple. Yet here and in Proverbs 6:20, the mention of both father and mother make it clear that an actual son is being addressed. Perhaps Solomon wrote this for his own son—though it is later sad to see that his son Rehoboam did not walk in the ways of wisdom, following the foolish advice of his peers rather than the wisdom of elders (a fact made more understandable by the terrible failings of Solomon himself later in life). In any case, every child is to be the student of his parents. This applies to girls as well as to boys.

The book’s first exhortation (Proverbs 1:8-19) is an appeal to reject enticements to run with the wrong crowd—in this case people bent on harming others for gain. Regarding verses 17-19, *The New American Commentary* states: “Verse 17 is confusing as translated in the [NKJV,] NIV and most versions. Even if one is willing to admit that a bird is intelligent enough to recognize the purpose of a trap when it sees it (which is doubtful),

the proverb has no point in context. In addition, the Hebrew cannot sustain the translation of 'spread a net.' The line is best rendered, 'In the eyes of a bird, the net is strewn {with grain} for no reason.' In other words, the bird does not see any connection between the net and what is scattered on it; he just sees food that is free for the taking. In the process he is trapped and killed. In the same way, the gang cannot see the connection between their acts of robbery and the fate that entraps them. In vv. 18-19 the teacher brings his point home: the gang members are really ambushing themselves. The very reverse of their proposal in v. 11 has come about. Also, v. 19 concludes, it will ever be that way" (note on verses 8-19).

We then have, in verses 20-33, the first appeal of wisdom in the book, a discourse with a symmetrical or chiasmic structure (*NAC*, note on verses 20-33):

A Introduction: an appeal for listeners (vv. 20-21)

B Address to the untutored, scoffers and fools (v. 22)

C Declaration of disclosure (v. 23)

D Reason for the announcement (vv. 24-25)

E Announcement of derisive judgment (vv. 26-28)

D' Reason for the announcement (vv. 29-30)

C' Declaration of retribution (v. 31)

B' Fate of the untutored and fools (v. 32)

A' Conclusion: an appeal for a hearer (v. 33)

Wisdom is personified as a woman crying out for others to hear and heed her instruction. Further chance to reform is given to those who have thus far failed to heed. For those who do accept correction, Wisdom says, "Surely I will pour out my spirit on you" (verse 23). In its immediate context, this simply means wisdom will be given to those who are willing to learn. Yet since the fullness of wisdom is to be found in God, this could ultimately

represent God saying that He will give His Spirit, which brings ultimate understanding and wisdom, to those who accept Him. Again, however, this is not what is directly stated here.

“Wisdom is a personification and not a person or a goddess. The statement that fools call on her when they get into trouble is not a reference to literal prayer but a dramatic picture of fools trying to find a way out of the trouble they are in. They ‘call on’ her in the sense that they are at last ready to listen to advice, but it is too late. Their indifference to Wisdom has already destroyed them (v. 32)” (same note). Of course, their rejection of wisdom is a rejection of choosing to fear God (verse 29), which is the *beginning* of wisdom (see Proverbs 1:7; Proverbs 9:10).

This sad warning ends in Proverbs 1:33 with an assurance of security for those who will heed. As noted in the introduction, we must understand this as a general truth over the course of life. It is not a promise that bad things will never happen to righteous and wise people. Ultimately, of course, absolute and eternal security will be granted to the righteous in the future Kingdom of God.” [END]

Verse 5 – Are we always willing to learn from others? Do we ask others for their thoughts and opinions or do we think we know it all already?

I’m struck by the sadness of how often we as mankind think we know better than God. Following God would have kept us safe and on the right path, but we follow our own hearts and minds and bring about problems in our lives that could have been avoided. As I reflect on my life, I see times where this has been true in my life.