

BIBLE SURVEY

PROVERBS - WISDOM FOR TODAY

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NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION.

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Preface

I am again indebted to Philip Parsons for his excellent work on surveying the Old Testament book of Proverbs for use in the Serving Today radio programme for Pastors and Church leaders. Proverbs deals with a wide variety of subjects scattered throughout the book and Philip has helpfully classified the main themes for us. His sermon suggestions at the end of this booklet could be preached as individual sermons or serve as an outline of a series of messages on each of the themes he has considered. It is our prayer that the Lord himself will enlarge your understanding of this wise and practical Biblical book, most of all increasing your fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom.

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Chapter 1: General Introduction

The book of Proverbs, like the Psalms, belongs to that section of the Old Testament which our Lord refers to as the Psalms (Luke 24:4). In the Hebrew Old Testament this 3rd section of the Bible not only includes Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon, but also Ruth, Lamentations, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel and Chronicles. The order of books in our Bibles is different from the order of the books in the Hebrew Old Testament because it follows the order of the translation of the Old Testament into Greek, known as the Septuagint. This group of writings, which includes Proverbs, is sometimes referred to as the ‘wisdom literature’ of the Old Testament. That is certainly a very apt name for this particular book.

1. Writers and Dates of Writing

Like many other books of the Old Testament, there was not a single author of Proverbs. Solomon is the main contributor (1:1) but there are also contributions from Agur (chapter 30), King Lemuel (31:1-9) and two sections of ‘sayings of the wise’. It is not known who the writers of these other sections actually were. Lemuel’s sayings point to a non-Israelite background.

It is possible to date Solomon’s reign with considerable accuracy from 970 to 930 BC. 3000 proverbs are attributed to him in 1 Kings 4:32, which refer to the earlier part of his reign, before his backsliding. The other contributions of the

book were more than likely added in Hezekiah's time, during the revival which occurred during his reign 715-686 BC (Proverbs 25:1).

2. What is a Proverb?

Although most of the book is devoted to pithy sayings of two lines in length, the Hebrew word, 'proverb', has a broader meaning than our English term. It can also mean oracle or parable, which accounts for the longer sections of the book. In the short sayings there is often some repetition of a word or a sound to aid memory. Nearly all the proverbs consist of two statements. Many of them express a contrast (10:1), while in some the second statement complements the first (11:25). Because the proverbs were written for instruction, many of them are put in the form of a command (20:13). Figurative language is often used. In chapter 25 alone there are eleven verses which are similes. Sometimes the similes are humorous or even sarcastic (11:22). Metaphors are also occasionally used (15:4).

3. The Purpose of the Book of Proverbs

The book of Proverbs describes the life that conforms to God's wisdom not man's. That is to God's standards of right and wrong rather than man's. Its precepts, whether encouraging or warning, are meant to lead us into the life which matches the perfect will of God. Do you want to know the will of God for your life? It's all here in this book

of heavenly wisdom. That purpose is clearly set out in the first seven verses, the prologue.

The form in which the book of Proverbs is written highlights the sheer variety of the ways in which the truth is presented in the Scriptures. As one writer puts it:-

“Proverbs is a book which seldom takes you to church... its function in Scripture is to put godliness into working clothes; to name business and society as spheres in which we are to acquit ourselves with credit to our Lord, and in which we are to look for his training.” (Kidner)

Chapter 2: The Main Themes

As we go through the book, this study will consider it under some of the major subjects it deals with. It is to be remembered that other subjects are also found in smaller passages throughout the book.

1. Our Relationship to God

By comparison with the other contemporary collections of wise sayings from the Middle East, the book of Proverbs stands head and shoulders above them all in its clear monotheism of the covenant God of Israel. In nearly ninety proverbs, God's covenant name Yahweh (the Lord) is used. We are advised that the 'fear' of the Lord is both the

beginning of wisdom (9:10) and the result of obtaining wisdom (2:5). This word ‘fear’ implies not only a healthy respect for, but also an intimate acquaintance with the living God. He is a God who is to be acknowledged in **all** our ways (3:6) and who if we walk before him uprightly will take us into his confidence (3:32). A vital element of this walking with God is trust in him. Almost paradoxically for this book, faith is considered to be more important than prudence (3:5). However wise and sound our plans may be, all our planning is subject to God’s final answer (19:21).

2. Wisdom

This is the great theme of the book and considerable space is devoted to this subject. There are five groups of words that form the component parts of wisdom.

(i) **Instruction or training** (1:2a, 3a) This word invariably includes a note of sternness that reminds us that wisdom is only to be had as a result of ‘toil, blood, sweat and tears’. This idea comes out particularly strongly in (2:3,4) and (8:34).

(ii) **Understanding or insight** (2:2) The idea is that of discernment, particularly between good and evil. This is what Solomon had asked God for when he became the king of Israel (1 Kings 3:9).

(iii) **Good sense** (10:5) This word is often linked with success, but it also refers to justice and fairness (1:3b).

(iv) **Shrewdness and discretion** (22:3) The idea behind these words is that of planning or even scheming, which the truly wise will do.

(v) **Knowledge and learning** This word refers not so much to information gained, but to the ability to rightly use that information. Supremely it is knowledge of the truth and of God himself (2:5).

In the first nine chapters, wisdom is often personified, so much so that some consider the writers to be speaking of an actual heavenly Being. The Jehovah’s Witnesses base their doctrine of Christ on this concept. A better view would be that the personification of wisdom is a powerful poetic metaphor used to drive home the importance of true wisdom in all its forms. Having said that, the personification of wisdom is a pointer to the full New Testament revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ as **the** Word (John 1) and **the** Wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24 & 30).

Wisdom also carries with it the idea of conversion; turning from evil (8:13) and from one’s own independence (14:12).

3. The Fool

As well as having much to say about true wisdom, Proverbs also has much to say about the fool and his folly. The Bible always emphasizes the negative as well as the positive and this is no exception to that rule. We can summarise Proverbs' teaching about the fool under three groups. At first, the fool is described as:-

(i) The simple. The simple is one who is gullible, easily led, characterized by lazy thoughtlessness; the kind of person who has no time for doctrine and who shirks discipline of any kind. At that stage there is still hope for recovery (19:25), but if persisted in, empty headedness will soon deteriorate into wrong-headedness, and a stronger term is used which we consider next.

(ii) The fool. There are three different words which when translated read, 'fool', and they occur in the book well over fifty times. The folly described is not a reference to intellectual ability but to a chosen way of thinking. The fool is characterized by stupidity, stubbornness and unteachableness. He is opinionated and always right in his own eyes. He knows no restraint and has no sense of proportion. There is a kind of moral insolence about him, and at bottom what he is rejecting is the fear of the Lord.

(iii) The scoffer. This person is really a fool, but is a little better organised in his folly. He tries to influence others to follow his evil ways. The final withering judgement for this kind of person is that God will scorn him (3:34).

4. The Sluggard

The sluggard is characterized by sheer animal laziness (6:9). He is always full of excuses (20:4). He finds reasons not to begin things and what he begins he will never finish. Because he always takes the soft option he does not face things. If you try and get him to do anything, you will usually end up exasperated. He is too attached to his bed, so is exhorted to observe the industry of the ant (6:6), who never seems to weary.

“The sluggard is as often as not an ordinary man who has made too many excuses, too many refusals and too many postponements. It has all been as imperceptible and as pleasant as falling asleep.” (Kidner)

See chapter 19, verse 15, chapter 20, verse 13 and chapter 24, verse 33. There is something of the sluggard in us all and the tendency needs to be vigorously resisted and mortified.

5. The Friend

Here we come back to a more positive line of teaching showing us the qualities of a true friend:-

- (i) A true friend is constant and will stay with us through thick and thin (18:24).
- (ii) A true friend is frank (27:6). The opposite of such courageous frankness can prove disastrous (29:5).
- (iii) A true friend is a counsellor. He will not always agree, but his disagreements are beneficial (27:17).
- (iv) A true friend is tactful and does not force his friendship (25:17). He also knows when a joke has gone far enough (26:18,19).

6. The Tongue

Proverbs has much to say about words and their use. They can be a great power either for good or evil (18:21). They can wound or bring healing; they can disseminate the truth or inculcate false teachings. But although words have a power, they can also be weak. They are certainly no substitute for actions - we all know about mere talk, and the type of person who is always talking about what he could do but never actually achieves anything at all. Words cannot alter facts (26:23) and will make no impression on the day of judgement (24:12). They cannot compel a response (29:19) as those who often exhort from the pulpit will know only too well.

What are the marks of words at their best?

- (i) They are honest (16:13).
- (ii) They will be few (10:19) and there are times when we will actually conceal a matter (11:13).
- (iii) They will be calm (25:15).
- (iv) They will be apt. (25:11).

There is a craftsman's delight indicated in some of the expressions used about apt words (25:11). How then are we to attain to such speech? It will only come by the hard graft of study (15:28) which is also coupled with godliness of character (10:20). Both are essential; without either, our words will be largely useless.

7. Marriage and the Family

As you would expect, Proverbs has much to say about the family. Monogamy is implied as the norm in its teachings. There is no indication here of the idea that the woman was a chattel and mere child-bearer. She is spoken of as the closest of friends (2:17). The ideal wife is described in 31:10 and following as an administrator, trader, craftswoman, philanthropist and guide, who is centred primarily in her home but whose influence extends well beyond its limits. On the other hand, there are warnings about the quarrelsome wife.

Husbands and wives are not only exhorted to loyalty, but to ardency in their love for each other. As we would expect, sexual sin is condemned and regarded as the squandering of

powers, which were designed for the foundation of family life.

The concept of couples deciding not to have children is totally alien to Proverbs, which has much to say about the upbringing of children. Both parents are to share this responsibility and although much of the activity falls upon the mother, fathers must not shirk their part in this vital task (4:3,4). The rod is to be used in discipline, recognizing the weakness of mere words, but its use is not to be overbearing, as the whole tone of the book implies. It should be a last resort. While good training is designed to lead to true godliness and righteousness, a good home may sometimes produce an idler, a profligate, a rebel or one who curses. In the last resort a man must bear his own blame.

8. Life and Death

The word ‘life’ appears often in the book. It is clearly not to be restricted to mere existence in this world. The very fact that terms such as the ‘tree of life’ (11:30), the ‘fountain of life’ (14:27) and ‘the path of life’ (5:6) are used, indicates a spiritual dimension. What had been lost in paradise and will not be fully restored until the Consummation, can to some measure be enjoyed here and now when a man walks with God.

On the subject of death, while Proverbs does not have the benefit of New Testament revelation, death for the wicked is totally without hope (11:7). For the righteous and God-

fearing, there is hope beyond the grave (14:32), a hope which has been fully revealed to us through the coming of Christ.

Chapter 3: Sermon Suggestions from Proverbs

As mentioned in the preface these sermon suggestions can be used in two ways. First a single sermon could be produced on each of the seven subjects considered. Alternatively and with some extra study a series of sermons could be produced under each subject using one or two of the sub headings in each sermon. Remember also that these suggestions are by no means exhaustive but we trust they will stimulate you to search the book of Proverbs further because there is a wealth of material in them.

1. True Wisdom

- (a) Begins with “the fear of the Lord” (9:10).
- (b) Implies a turning from evil (8:13).
- (c) Requires diligence to attain (2:3,4; 8:34; 4:7).
- (d) Leads to the knowledge of God (2:5).
- (e) Is full of good sense (10:5).
- (f) Is just and fair (1:3).
- (g) Is characterized by true discernment (2:2).

Some sections of the book speak of wisdom in personal feminine terms. Although we should resist equating this with the second person of the Trinity, our Lord Jesus Christ,

the New Testament does speak of Christ in his saving role as the “*wisdom of God*” (1 Corinthians 1:23-24).

2. The Danger of Foolishness

- (a) Foolishness is the opposite of wisdom.
- (b) Begins with “*the simple*”, characterized by laziness and thoughtlessness (8:5).
- (c) The simple can be made wise (19:25).
- (d) The next stage is “*the fool*” who has become stubborn, unteachable (15:5), and opinionated (12:15), and rejects the “*fear of the Lord*”.
- (e) The final stage is “*the scoffer*”, who is positively opposed to God and will try and influence others to follow his evil ways.
- (f) The final end of the fool: destruction (1:32), scorned and judged by God (3:34; 19:29).

3. Words and Their Uses

- (a) Great power for either good or evil; they can wound, bring healing, be true or false (18:21).
- (b) They can be weak and are no substitute for actions.
- (c) They cannot alter facts (26:23).
- (d) They will make no impression on the day of judgement (24:12).
- (e) They cannot compel a response (29:19).
- (f) Words at their best are:-
 - i. honest (16:13).

- ii. will be few (10:19).
 - iii. will sometimes conceal a matter (11:13).
 - iv. will be calm (25:15).
 - v. will be apt (25:11).
- (g) Achieving the best use of words will:-
- i. Only be by the hard work of study (15:18).
 - ii. Only come with godliness of character (10:20).
- * Without either of these our words will be of little use.

4. The Marriage Relationship

- (a) Monogamy is the assumed norm – infidelity in marriage is abhorred (6:24-29).
- (b) Ardency of married love encouraged (5:18-19).
- (c) Sexual sin is the squandering of our powers (5:3-6).
- (d) The woman is not a mere chattel.
- (e) Children are the expected result of marriage – childlessness by choice is alien to the book’s teachings.
- (f) The woman is not to be considered as a mere child-bearer.
- (g) The ideal wife is:-
 - i. The closest of friends (2:17).
 - ii. An administrator, trader, craftswoman, philanthropist and guide (31:10- 31), centred at home, but with influence far beyond it.

- iii. A quarrelsome wife is warned against (21:9; 19:13).

5. The Training of Children

- (a) Both parents should share in this vital task (4:3-4).
- (b) Discipline is essential (23:13,14).
- (c) Use of the rod is an essential part of discipline (13:24).
- (d) The training of children affects their future life (22:6).
- (e) A good home will not always guarantee a godly child.

6. The Benefit of Work and the Curse of Laziness

- (a) Work is praised, laziness condemned.
- (b) Hard work brings wealth; laziness brings poverty (12:24; 13:4; 21:5).
- (c) The sluggard will not endure difficulty and ‘reaps’ the result (20:4).
- (d) All work should be undertaken under the all-seeing eye of God (16:3).

7. The True Friend

- (a) Is constant and faithful (18:24).
- (b) Is frank (27:6).
- (c) His disagreements are beneficial (27:7).
- (d) Is tactful (25:17).
- (e) Is a blessing from God, but needs to be cultivated.

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