

**Proverbs, I**

We will now be studying Proverbs. Let me begin with an introductory question. As you read Proverbs, what impression does it make on you? Does an outline present itself as you are reading Proverbs? Not particularly, does it? Do you ever wish someone would organize this? Of course, many modern books that you can purchase now organize these Proverbs thematically. We may ask ourselves why Proverbs is not organized thematically. As we study Proverbs we will find various answers to this question, but let me begin with a comment by Robert Alden, a good Old Testament scholar, from his commentary on Proverbs. He says this: “A spiritual diet of Proverbs alone would be most unbalanced, but how sick a person might be that did not occasionally ingest some of these potions and antidotes for the sake of his mental, spiritual, and even financial well being. Proverbs is the kind of biblical fare you should indulge in often, but not in large doses. The stuff of Proverbs has already been distilled so that its advice comes to us in highly concentrated form. These sage tidbits have been boiled down, trimmed, honed, polished, and sharpened to where a little goes a long way.”

I like that image, that metaphor, but does that help us explain the apparently haphazard arrangement of Proverbs that we encounter? Within any section of Proverbs, a broad smattering of topics is covered. We never know what challenges we will face in a day, so read a chapter in Proverbs and you will get a little bit of wisdom on many topics, and that is helpful. Now, I think there is more to it than that, and we will come to more of the reasons behind the organization, but that is a start in acknowledging that this was not a sloppily arranged book. I think we will see that it is more ingeniously arranged than we ever realized. But even at the outset we can say there is a sense of skipping from topic to topic. Thus, while there is a place for these books that group the proverbs together topically, that may not be the best way to read Proverbs. You may read all about a godly perspective on wealth one day, and not struggle with that issue for a long time, whereas you may be having real trouble with your temper but not read that section until later. But you cannot read too many chapters in Proverbs without both of those issues being addressed.

Now let us move on to the question of authorship. Who is the author of Proverbs? Solomon, Hezekiah (chapter 25), Agur, and King Lemuel are the authors. At the beginning of Proverbs 25 we read, “These are more proverbs of Solomon, copied by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah.” There we get the impression that there was Solomonic material that was not in the original writing of Proverbs. Then during the reign of Hezekiah, two centuries after Solomon, it was deemed appropriate to include that Solomonic material in this book. Some of these Old Testament books did not take shape in a day, a month, or even a year, but sometimes over a span of centuries, as we see here. Agur we have no information about, but he is mentioned at the beginning of chapter 30. And then there is King Lemuel, who got his wisdom from his mother. Let that be a lesson to you. Mothers have much wisdom to impart. Those four are named explicitly, and there may be others. Nevertheless, Solomon is the primary author of this book.

When the men of Hezekiah incorporated Solomonic material into the book, was that material available to them in written form or as oral tradition? There is absolutely no way to know that. It is true that the ancients and some moderns were far more capable of retaining oral tradition than we are. There are people, places, and cultures that retain orally an incredible amount of information. My wife and I spoke at a women’s conference in Uganda. Many of the women, probably half the women, were literate and could read and write while about half of them could not. But even those who could read and write had very few writing materials. It was a very poor area. I gave the talk on the first day and then my wife spoke the next day. In her talk she wanted to reference something I had said the day before. She started to reiterate what I had said, and they nodded their heads and said, “He said that yesterday; we have not

forgotten that. You do not need to tell us again.” I think, wow! They were sitting in lectures probably four or five hours a day, yet they were taking all of that in and remembering it. Memory is a facility that we can learn and train, but also one that we can lose. So, we do not know whether Hezekiah had Solomon’s proverbs in written form, but it is more possible than we would tend to think that they had been preserved as oral tradition. If I had to speculate I would say that it is likely that there was some written record of this Solomonic material that had not been included originally. Solomon, in his own formation of his collection, had chosen from his 3,000 proverbs (1 Kings 4:32), but had not originally included the proverbs that were later added by Hezekiah.

We will now look at the structure and content of Proverbs. There are seven headings in Proverbs that seem to be inherent divisions in the book. The first heading and the last heading can be subdivided into two subsections. The first heading, from Proverbs 1:1 is “The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel.” The second comes in 10:1: “The proverbs of Solomon.” The third is in 22:17: “Pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise.” And the fourth, in 24:23, is like it: “These also are sayings of the wise.” We might ask, if we are continuing the sayings of the wise, why another heading? We will see that there was a reason for that. The fifth heading is in 25:1: “These are more proverbs of Solomon, copied by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah.” The sixth is in Proverbs 30:1: “The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh—an oracle.” There are many translation questions on that one. The seventh and final heading is in Proverbs 31:1: “The sayings of King Lemuel—an oracle his mother taught him. That section includes the acrostic of the ideal wife. The word wife here is used in the old English sense of a woman or a wife, a worthy woman. This is the same way that the word *frau* in German is used to mean both wife and woman.

Let us look at the first section, “The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel.” In the first seven verses, like many ancient Near Eastern wisdom books, we have first a title and then a statement of the purpose of the book:

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:  
 for attaining wisdom and discipline;  
     for understanding words of insight;  
 for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life,  
     doing what is right and just and fair;  
 for giving prudence to the simple,  
     knowledge and discretion to the young—  
 let the wise listen and add to their learning,  
     and let the discerning get guidance—  
 for understanding proverbs and parables,  
     the sayings and riddles of the wise.  
 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,  
     but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

Here we have a title and then a statement of purpose including an exhortation in verse 5, which says, “Let the wise listen.” Notice that verse 4 mentions the simple: “for giving prudence to the simple.” And yet this is not just for the simple. This is a book that is pertinent to the wisest of people. “Let the wise listen and add to their learning, / and let the discerning get guidance.”

So the book begins with a title: “The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel.” Some have questioned whether this title applies to the whole book as kind of a generalized title, or only to the first section (chapters 1-9). Kidner says that this title applies to the whole book; “otherwise we would expect

the first verse of chapter 10 (“the proverbs of Solomon”) to read, “these also are proverbs of Solomon.” We see this in Proverbs 24:23: “These also are sayings of the wise.” Kidner’s point is that if the first 9 chapters are written by Solomon then we would expect chapter 10 to say, “These also are proverbs of Solomon.” That is not an absolutely iron clad argument, and it might be worth recognizing that the first nine chapters are exhortations. The father is saying, “Listen, my son, to your father’s instructions and do not neglect your mother’s teaching.” He is exhorting his son. These are not short proverbs, but paragraph-length exhortations to choose wisdom over folly. Then when we get to chapter 10 there are more of what we expect when we think of a proverb or a saying—a snappy little pithy, wise saying. It may be that we can say that 1:1 does apply to the whole book, but that would not necessarily mean that the first nine chapters could not have been written by Solomon. Many commentaries would assume that they were not, but often for wrong reasons such as that they are not short and brief but longer and more elaborate. That is a poor criterion for dating documents, because we now have ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature that comes before Solomon by about 1500 years that is very long, elaborate, and discursive. Thus it should not surprise us to find this here.

What is the purpose of Proverbs? The purpose is for attaining wisdom and discipline and for understanding words of insight, etc. He uses about all the synonyms he can think of to suggest what a person can gain from reading this book. Verses 2-6 suggest that those who attend to them will receive a comprehensive set of intellectual and moral qualities. This is what you need to get by in life and to get by well. But notice that the key verse, the motto not only for Proverbs but for the wisdom literature in general, comes in verse 7. This is the first principle, the motto of wisdom literature. It is repeated in Proverbs 9:10: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, / and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” Remember that knowledge can mean acknowledgement—knowing Him and also acknowledging Him. That and fear of the Lord are understanding. That is the quintessential point, which was also made in Psalm 111:10. I want to make sure that this gets ingrained. If you learn nothing else, learn this fundamental principle as it is stated in Psalm 111:10: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; / all who follow his precepts have good understanding.” The reason I like that verse in particular is that it combines an attitude of respectful awe toward God with action. Do not be just a hearer of the word, but a doer also.

Over and over in the wisdom books, particularly in Proverbs but even in Job (28:28), we will have this motto repeated. That should undergird everything we think about when we think about the practicalities of life. One commentator says, “[After this introduction in 1:1-7], the reader will then be in a position to see all the book’s teaching as directed towards the formation of the complete person, both wise and pious—wise because pious and pious because wise.” If God is truly God, then surely we ought to make Him the focal point of our attention. We must recognize that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The whole book is pushing toward the formation of the complete person. Does that speak to us at all today? Are there any broken people around today—any incomplete people? We live in a dysfunctional world, we have problems with dysfunctional families and dysfunctional personalities; we have all kinds of problems. I am not saying there are easy answers, but I say there is an answer that begins with fear of the Lord. This is the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of completion, and the beginning of healing. Now, some of that healing takes a long time and requires many different kinds of treatments. But God is at the center of that, and He is the one who will make it complete—if not in this lifetime then in the next.

Ray Van Leuven, a good evangelical scholar who has done much work on Proverbs, referring to verse 7 says, “Here God and humans, wisdom and folly, knowledge and sweat born of parental urging, are related in the tight space of eight Hebrew words. [“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.”] Life is caught between the pull of God and the good, and the

pull toward folly and pseudo-good. Faith is not opposed to reason but constitutes its possibility, its connection to reality. More, the word ‘beginning’ contains the hint to be elaborated throughout the first nine chapters that life is not static, but a journey whose end is found in its beginning.

Let me repeat two of his statements because I think they are important: “Faith is not opposed to reason but constitutes its possibility, its connection to reality.” Sometimes in our Western world people look at those who embrace faith as dreamers. We want to be honest; we want to be realists. We tend to think that faith divorces us from reality. The point being made here is that faith is not opposed to reason but constitutes its possibility, its connection to reality. If God is really there, then to act and think as if He is not is the height of irrationality. The dream world is that which does not recognize God’s presence and sovereignty. If God is there, then to act and live as if He is not is to live in a dream world. Believers are not the dreamers. It is the unbelievers who are in for a rude awakening. They are the ones who will awaken as out of sleep. This is very important: faith in God, putting Him in the center, is not to become less practical. It is to become real. That is the way the real world exists. His other statement, which I think is important, is this: “The word “beginning” contains the hint to be elaborated throughout the first nine chapters, that life is not static but a journey whose end is found in its beginning.” The end of our life is found in its beginning: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” I hope my love, understanding, fear, knowledge, and acknowledgement of God grow from day to day, week to week, and year to year. That is where it begins. Until I have begun there I have not taken the first step in real wisdom. I could be very clever with much intelligence, and I could be very, very dangerous if I have not taken the first step in real wisdom—and I could also be very miserable.

These first nine chapters provide a necessary orientation to the book. These paragraph-length discussions provide a little treatise on certain focal points or topics that later will be touched on much more briefly in those little sentence sayings. This gives us the context in which we can understand the little sayings. We get an introduction here into these very important themes.

As we study this first section of chapters 1-9, the first thing we notice in 1:8 is that wisdom begins in the home: “Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction.” In 6:20 he says, “My son, keep your father’s commands / and do not forsake your mother’s teaching.” Both parents are involved in the instruction of children. Who is addressed here, however? Sons. Does that mean that daughters were not worthy of address? No! It does not mean that daughters were not worthy of address. Is it important, however, to recognize that the addressees of Proverbs are the sons? I do think it is important to recognize that sons are being addressed, and by implication of course daughters, but why would I say that is important? If we gender neutralize the language so it appears to be just addressing children in general and then only address the wiles of the adulterous woman, it begins to sound like women were really bad and children needed to be warned of bad women but not bad men. That would be a mistake.

Let us look at another theme. I do not like the term “retributive justice” because retribution has a negative connotation in our culture. I prefer to call this theme causal or causative justice. Our actions do have repercussions; they do have consequences. Proverbs 2:21-22 says, “For the upright will live in the land, / and the blameless will remain in it; / but the wicked will be cut off from the land, / and the unfaithful will be torn from it.” Actions have consequences: the upright will live in the land; the wicked will be cut off from it. Proverbs 3:33-35 says, “The Lord’s curse is on the house of the wicked, / but he blesses the home of the righteous. / He mocks proud mockers / but gives grace to the humble. / The wise inherit honor, / but fools he holds up to shame.” Over and over again we have this contraposition of the righteous and the wicked, the wise and the fools. Their actions have consequences. Our actions have consequences. This is a very fundamental principle of life that is not to be obscured by our rightful understanding of grace. Our behavior does not accrue merit with God. God is never beholden to us. We

do not make ourselves His children by being good. Nevertheless, as our Father He gives us wise instruction, and in following them there is blessing. Again, He does not owe us blessing but in the general sense in which we understand the Proverbs, it is good for us to heed the Father's instruction.

Another theme, a very important theme, is the limitations of human understanding. We as human beings are limited in our understanding. Proverbs 3:5-6 says, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart / and lean not on your own understanding; / in all your ways acknowledge him, / and he will make your paths straight." Man is limited. And Proverbs, which is intent on imparting wisdom and giving instruction whereby the simple gain understanding and the wise add to their understanding, nevertheless says we will never know it all. Our knowledge will never be sufficient, so do not lean on your own understanding. Do not think you have enough. Proverbs 22:19, at the beginning of the first set of the sayings of the wise, says, "So that your trust may be in the LORD, / I teach you today, even you." He is saying, "I want you to learn all you can so that you will come to the end of your own understanding and realize there is more that you will not be able to fathom. God's thoughts are higher than your thoughts. Do not lean on your own understanding. Do not think you are wise enough to cease to depend on Him."

Another section that deals with this theme includes those famous words of Agur in 30:2:

I am the most ignorant of men;  
    I do not have a man's understanding.  
I have not learned wisdom,  
    nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.  
Who has gone up to heaven and come down?  
    Who has gathered up the wind in the hollow of his hands?  
Who has wrapped up the waters in his cloak?  
    Who has established all the ends of the earth?  
What is his name, and the name of his son?  
    Tell me if you know!

Every word of God is flawless;  
    he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.  
Do not add to his words,  
    or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.

Contrasting the self-avowed ignorance of Lemuel, we come face to face with the flawless word of God. Therein lies real wisdom, and we will not fully grasp it in this life. We will learn that more clearly as we study other wisdom books. But it is important for us to see that even in Proverbs, human wisdom has a limit. It can go so far but no further.