

# PROVERBS

When Melanie and I were expecting our firstborn child, we had to attend a few sessions for new parents from our local health unit. There were various aspects that they wanted to cover – some child safety matters like how to protect a newborn in car seat, safety for a sleeping newborn, signs of health and vitality. But one aspect that was repeated was that there was no manual for being a parent.

Life isn't like a vehicle. I can open my glove compartment and pull out a manual for my car and look up almost any part or feature of my vehicle and know what I need – from wipers to oil filters to tire size and pressure. But even with a manual, my car has complex components that make it a sophisticated piece of machinery. Life is more complex – you don't get a manual for your children when they come into your home.

But Proverbs is intended to be a manual for future monarchs, and this is the argument that Bruce Malchow made in an article 1985, and I'm convinced that he is correct to some degree. But when we read Proverbs, it doesn't seem to be a manual. At least we read it and think that chapters 1-9 make perfect sense – they are 10 speeches from King Solomon to his son with an interspersing of 3 wisdom poems. But when we get to chapter 10, it just seems that Proverbs is random, chaotic, and without order. If this is a book for future rulers and leaders, then how does it work, and how is this intended to help us grow in wisdom? What I want to do this morning is cover 20 chapters of Proverbs before we dive into them in detail because I want to explore this book as a book and see that there is maybe more going on in Proverbs than we realize. So – how does Proverbs work to help us grow in wisdom?

## **1. *Grow in the Fear of the Lord***

In its introduction, Proverbs makes it clear that the way that we are to grow is by 'the fear of the Lord' (1:7). This fear of the Lord will give you insight into who God is (9:10), and so this becomes the first key to understanding how the book works as a manual to grow.

For many people, once you pass over chapters 1-9, you get into the random sayings of Proverbs 10-29 and piece things together. But you could take an isolated Proverb and use it in a way that would help you in life and you wouldn't have to be a Christian. So you might look up a Proverb on anger and discover that a gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger (Prov. 15:1) and decide that you want to work on your words so that you don't stir up anger. And you don't have to be a Christian to learn these skills. Anyone can. And there is a goodness about that – all truth is God's truth, so you can learn skills for a better life.

But Proverbs isn't interested in people being merely moral for the sake of being moral. Many people have approached this book and said that the wisdom of Proverbs is creational – in other words, that it applies to anyone anywhere and is rooted in how God has designed the world. And to that I would say, "I agree, but!" There is more going on in Proverbs than meets the eye.

**Living the Good Life: Grow in Wisdom – Prov. 10-29**

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Proverbs uses this phrase “the fear of the Lord” many times. It starts us off in its introduction telling us that we are to fear the Lord, and it repeats this phrase several times in chs. 1-9. It’s possible to understand the fear of the Lord (2:5); the fear of the Lord enables you to know good and bad and live a good life (3:7), including the hatred of pride and arrogance (8:13).

The fear of the Lord will give you long life (10:27; 14:27) and enable you to find a refuge when life is hard (14:26). The fear of the Lord is wealth itself (15:16) and produces a wealthy life (22:4). It will help you grow in contentment in life (19:23), and we need to pursue it all the days of our lives, especially when evil seems to be prospering (23:17). The fear of the Lord produces a respect of authority (24:21), and by the fear of the Lord we first have our sins forgiven and then walk in newness of life (16:6).

Proverbs uses this language of “the fear of the Lord” because wisdom is more than what God has done in creation; it is how his people are to relate to him. Deuteronomy uses this language of fearing the Lord (Deut. 5:29; 10:12, 20; 14:23; 31:12-13). In other words, God has made a covenant – he is committed to his people and his people are to be committed to him in a binding relationship of mutual love and respect. So what God calls us to do is to fear him – and in my first sermon on Proverbs, I said that this phrase “the fear of the Lord” means to live in repentance and faith. So what Proverbs roots us in is that all growth in wisdom and godliness starts with a life-long pursuit of repentance and faith. You never stop needing to repent and grow. In fact, repentance and faith probably increase the longer you are a Christian! This is one reason why we have a prayer of confession in our service – to show you that throughout the history of the Church, Christians have prayed prayers of confession over and over and over, and their models are to help us to grow in a life of repentance and faith. As Luther would say in his first thesis in 1517, when Christ calls us to repentance, he means the whole Christian life is one of growing in repentance and faith.

So the first way we grow in wisdom is to grow in the fear of the Lord. Then, we...

## ***2. Grow in Coherence***

The second thing that I want us to see is that Proverbs does function as a book to help us grow in the coherence of wisdom. In other words, wisdom applies to all of life, but life isn’t given to us like a manual. So when a manual for life and living well comes along, it probably will require wisdom to know how to use the manual!

I once had a puzzle that had been given to me and it didn’t come in a box. I had no idea what it looked like. What I had to do was pull all of the edge pieces out and fit them together. Then I had to build from the edges out, finding matching colours and pieces that fit. Proverbs is just like that – it’s been put together for us.

For a long time, people thought that Proverbs 1-9 was a clear introduction and that Proverbs 30-31 summed up the book, but that Proverbs 10-29 was just a random smattering of chaotic sayings. The edges were clear, but the middle of the puzzle didn't seem to have much order to it. And when we look at Proverbs, it does feel that way. One proverb talks about wealth, then next about speech, and another talks about how to be a friend.

But there is growing evidence that Proverbs is a book, and it takes the random sayings of Solomon and the wise and it has been organized. And it seems to be organized on two levels. The first is the micro-level. We can see this by noticing that Proverbs 10:6-23 are sayings almost entirely about how we use our mouth. Yesterday afternoon, Jude St. John spoke at Corporis about how the mouth is the ambassador of the heart, and so Proverbs makes it clear that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. Our mouths reveal what is really inside of us. There are more examples that I could give, but often Proverbs are collected together so that their relationship isn't merely by hunting through the book and collecting all the sayings individually and then trying to piece it together yourself, but by looking at the surrounding Proverbs. They are often building and growing together.

Not only is Proverbs 10-29 organized on a micro-level, but also on a macro-level. Andrew Steinmann shows this in his commentary on Proverbs, and he does it in a beautiful way. First, notice that almost all of the Proverbs in chs. 10-15 are antithetical. They all make a statement followed by "but" – a contrast. Then in chs. 16-22:16, most of the Proverbs are synthetic or synonymous. They have some sort of parallelism.

Similarly, most of the Proverbs in chs. 10-12 are about righteousness and wickedness. It is very black and white. And chs. 15-16 have Proverbs that name YHWH. Andrew Steinmann says this: "Context is not completely lacking as a guide. Sayings were attached to one another not only because of literary features, but also because of thematic and semantic characteristics. Therefore one must be careful to examine the surrounding sayings to see how they shed light on a particular proverb. (Steinmann, *Proverbs*, Concordia Commentary, p. 253). In fact, Andrew Steinmann says that Proverbs 9 sets the stage for the first section of the book – Prov. 9:1-6 are paralleled in 10-17:6; that Proverbs 9:7-12 about the fear of the Lord is met with Proverbs 15-16, and avoiding the folly of Prov. 9:13-18 is matched in Prov. 17:7-22:16. And I think he is right.

We have these markers throughout the book that tell us that there are sections. Proverbs 10-22:16 are the sayings of Solomon. Proverbs 22:17 begins a section that calls us to pay attention to the wise. Proverbs 24:23-34 marks off a new section until we get to Proverbs 25:1 that runs to the end of chapter 29 – sayings of Solomon that King Hezekiah's men ordered. So there is a structure to the book. And what this means is that wisdom doesn't come to us easily. It takes hard work. It takes time and listening to the advice of others. It means that we have to grow more and more. Wisdom is not chaotic, and Proverbs is not a chaotic book. There is a coherence to it. This actually is one of the themes of wisdom – that wisdom is for all of life for those who would have eyes to see and ears to hear. Wisdom isn't easy!

When we see that wisdom isn't something easy, then it helps us to make sense of the wisest king of Israel. He wrote three books of the Bible – Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes. And guess what? These three books are books that are called wisdom literature and people have debated if there is any structure at all. That must mean that wisdom requires a lot of work and discernment. And the only way you can grow in coherence, the only way you can piece together all of these things is if you have the fear of the Lord and you work hard at growing in wisdom.

### ***3. Grow in Character***

If Proverbs then has some semblance of structure, we ought to expect that there is maybe more going on than meets the eye. And here, I follow the studies of Chris Ansberry, a professor of Biblical Studies. He has spent years examining Proverbs and I find that his insight into Proverbs is incredibly helpful. What Chris Ansberry does is he looks at the overall structure of the book and makes the case that there is a career path that is happening in Proverbs. Others have suggested this as well, and here is what he says.

First, the book of Proverbs as a manual for kings has a development to it. In chapters 1-9 you have the young man at home, learning from his father and mother. But in chapter 10:1, he is launched out of the house and into the world. Chapters 10-15 then are these antithetical statements – here is good, here is bad. And that is how we begin training and teaching children. They need the basics of right and wrong. They need to know what is good and evil.

But when you get out into the world, you discover that life is complicated. Things have to be nuanced more and more. So Proverbs 16-22 is this young man entering into the world of having to judge right and wrong. And consider how the complexity grows. In Prov. 10:22 we are told that it is a blessing to be rich and righteous. But Prov. 12:9 then says that it is better to be lowly (or humble) and have a servant than to be rich and lack bread. Then Prov. 15:16 says that it's better to have the fear of the Lord than to be rich. And then Prov. 16:8 commends poverty with the fear of the Lord over wealth and a character of dishonesty.

So what we discover is that by the time we reach the sayings of chapters 22-24, there is greater complexity. You need wisdom to navigate the working world. And if you're going to rule, chapters 25-27 make it clear that you need great skill if you're going to advance in your career. Consider Proverbs 26:4-5 – these two proverbs seem contradictory, and yet there is incredible complexity to them. When do you answer a fool, and when do you keep your mouth silent? And finally, Proverbs 28-29 shows us that this young man has been prepared for the kingship. This is why Proverbs 30-31 end with this king marrying lady wisdom and ruling well. There is a movement from simple to complex wisdom. Because you have to grow in applying wisdom to grow in character. It's not all simplicity. The wise person didn't stumble into it – they applied their heart to wisdom (Prov. 2:2; 23:12). They learned to live well moment by moment.

One example of this growth in complexity is the sayings about lions. In 19:12 and 20:2, there are proverbs about a righteous king being a lion; but in 28:15 an unjust king is a dangerous lion to avoid. There is certainly more going on in this book than initially meets the eye.

What this means is that wisdom doesn't come by reading a book. Wisdom doesn't come by knowing how to use the latest technology. Wisdom doesn't come by being smart. Wisdom comes by fearing the Lord, putting all the pieces of life together in a coherent way so that you can have the kind of character that can stand the storms of life and live consistently, faithfully, and joyfully.

And as you do that, what you discover is that you can...

#### ***4. Grow in the Wisdom of Christ***

In Luke 2:41-52, we are told the only story of boy Jesus. When Jesus was born and was taken to Jerusalem, his parents had a moment of crisis. They had gone to Jerusalem for the annual festival of Passover, to celebrate God's deliverance of his people out of Egypt from bondage and slavery. This was the beginning of God's work to free his people and take them home to live with him. But on the return from that trip, as they stopped at the end of the day, they discovered that Jesus wasn't with them. They searched high and low, and they returned to Jerusalem. After three days, they finally found him in the temple, and they were astonished, and everyone was amazed at his understanding and answers. He was boy genius! When Mary told him that she and Joseph were troubled, he answered them by saying that he had to be about his heavenly Father's business. They didn't understand what he meant, but he submitted and obeyed them and went home.

Luke concludes that section with two statements: Mary treasured up all these things in her heart. She remembered them. She thought about them. And there was something precious about them that caused her to be reflective on them. And when Luke interviewed her for his gospel, Mary recounted these events to Luke, and Luke's reflection on this is that the boy Jesus was growing in wisdom and stature, in favour with God and men.

Here was the perfect Son of God and Son of Man. Here he was, having to grow in wisdom. Here he was applying his heart to wisdom. Here he was fearing the Lord. And here he was growing in coherence and character.

And this wisdom would lead him back to Jerusalem where, on a future Passover, he would come and be crucified. He would be killed for claiming to be King of the Jews (Lk. 23:3, 38). Because this is what it looks like to be the wise king. This is what it means to rule. This is what it means to be rich in the things of God. For by going to the cross, Christ received the riches of his Father – the inheritance of nations (Ps. 2:8).

If this is how Christ grew as a man, then how much more shouldn't you and I apply ourselves to the wisdom of God? We have been given a manual on how to be wise and to live well. You want the good life? Work hard. Apply yourself to knowledge and understanding. Fear the Lord. Study this manual. You might find that this book is far more rich and comprehensive and surprising than you ever imagined. But start with asking the Lord to be your vision, your wisdom, your true word. And you might find that he opens up things to you that you could have never asked for or imagined (Eph. 3:21)!