

Chapter 20 Proverbs

Wisdom's Story

*“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and discipline.”* Proverbs 1:7

If the purpose of the Psalms is to show us how to interact with God in worship, then the purpose of Proverbs is to show us how to interact with each other in a way that pleases God. Everything about us, from our worship to our work and from birth to death, involves God. Our personal stories are immersed in God's Salvation History story. Worship and ethics, like the two tablets of Decalogue converge into a meaningful whole—life, and this liturgy of life is baptized in the Gospel of Jesus. Proverbs a legacy of wisdom given to the people of God and inspired by the Spirit of God. “Today's popular culture may not be showing us the righteous path,” writes author Steven Johnson. “But it is making us smarter” (Everything Bad is Good for You: How Popular Culture is making us Smarter, 2005, 14). Thankfully, Proverbs is a story of absolutes, not trends. It is not about casual, disposable relationships but about honest, enduring relationships.

Solomon's prayer for “a discerning heart” was answered by God in the gift of an invaluable tradition rooted in God-breathed revelation and articulate of God-shaped values. King Solomon was a catalyst for creatively collecting and authoring perspectives that shaped the imagination and daily life of the people of God. To what extent he was personally responsible for Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs is difficult to say, but under him, and in some cases in sharp contrast to his own life experience, a world-view was forged that helps us to visualize what it means to live for Yahweh in the home and work place, how to be a friend, how to respond to enemies, how to pursue justice and seek righteousness, how to be conscientious and compassionate, how to avoid temptation, how to grow through trials, how to think about wealth and respond to poverty, how to speak the truth and discern deception, and much, much more.

This Spirit-inspired wisdom tradition was designed to show the people of God, then and now, how to stay in the story *today*. It establishes a bond between the meta-narrative of God's salvation history and our personal life stories. From the beginning salvation was intended to encompass everything in our daily lives and our eternal destiny. There is an inseparable relationship between the Cross of Jesus Christ at the center of human history and the call of Jesus to take up our cross daily and follow him. We were meant to be reminded everyday in a thousand little ways that we are children of the covenant. Reverence for the Lord God should be evident in the totality of our life, including our family life, our work ethic, our leisure activities, and our ambitions. The same wisdom that set the stars in place and the planets in orbit calls for honest accounting practices and gossip-free conversation. Wisdom ranges from the mystery of the Big Bang creation event to the mundane task of working for a living.

The Fear of the Lord

The opening sentence lays out the goal of the book of Proverbs by “breaking up the plain daylight of wisdom into its rainbow of constituent colors” (Kidner, p.36). Wisdom is discipline, discretion, discernment and devotion. It is “doing what is right and just and fair.” Those who are wise listen, “and add to their learning.” They are receptive to guidance and open to insight.

Wisdom is far more than information and far greater than mere intelligence. It is a combination of training, instruction, good sense, careful learning, and sound judgment. It is acquired, cultivated, and nurtured by personal choice and earnest desire. Finding wisdom requires an act of the will; it takes initiative on our part to seek understanding. It means “turning [our] ear to wisdom and applying [our] heart to understanding” (2:2). It means crying aloud for understanding and searching for it as if it were hidden treasure (2:3-4). People go to great lengths to earn money, get-in-shape, experience pleasure, and impress other people, but Proverbs challenges us to seek wisdom. “For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you” (2:10-11).

The key truth upon which all wisdom rests is found at the end of the opening sentence of Proverbs, right where no one can miss it. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline” (1:7). It is the truth woven into the warp and woof of wisdom which cannot be pulled out without destroying the whole fabric of meaning. We are reminded of this truth throughout the book of Proverbs. In chapter two, only those who seek wisdom “will understand the fear of the Lord and find knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding” (2:5-6). In chapter three, the children of God are exhorted, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your way acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight” (3:5-6). In chapter nine, the first section of Proverbs (1-9) ends with this reaffirmation: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (9:10). The fear of the Lord is a confusing concept for those who associate fear with dread and anxiety, but in Proverbs it means faithful obedience, trusting commitment, and loving respect. The best illustration of this kind of fear may be found in a very good parenting relationship. As I matured, I feared displeasing my father far more than I feared his punishment. Fearing the Lord is the one and only fear that drives out fear. “Whoever listens to me,” says Wisdom, “will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm” (1:33).

Every aspect of wisdom commended in Proverbs is established by the Lord God. It is rooted in his providential care (10:3), his blessing (10:27), his justice (11:1), and his discernment (11:20; 12:2,22). Anyone who “walks the walk” fears the Lord and shuns evil (14:2,16). He alone is the true source for security and life (14:26-27). He delights in the righteous and detests the wicked (15:3,8,9). His discernment is perfect. “Death and destruction lie open before the Lord—how much more the hearts of men!” Or, to put it another way, “Even hell holds no secrets from God—do you think he can’t read human hearts?” (15:11, The Message). If we stray from the singular truth that “the fear of the Lord teaches a person wisdom” we fail to do justice to Proverbs (15:33). This knowledge of God is the overarching, all-encompassing source, substance and structure for wisdom. Those who extract a line here or there and ignore the core truth of the fear of the Lord, attempt to recast Proverbs into clever platitudes and moral maxims. But for the honest reader the practical wisdom of Proverbs cannot be reduced to common sense pragmatism. The counsel given in Proverbs is unlike Ben Franklin’s homey advice, “Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise,” and is on a different plane than when Confucius says, “Have no friends not equal to yourself.” Proverbs was never meant to be plagiarized by management experts and motivational speakers, who extract pithy sayings and leadership

pointers. A saying such as “All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty” (14:23) may motivate a secular audience, but it misses its intended meaning when it is lifted from a context which emphasizes the fear of the Lord. “He who fears the Lord has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge” (14:26). And again, “The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, turning a person from the snares of death” (14:26-27). The fear of the Lord runs through Proverbs like the unforgettable theme in Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. Far from being repetitive or redundant, it is the God-fearing truth that resonates with the people of God. It is this fear that inspires and empowers the quest for understanding. Wisdom in Proverbs never strays from the guiding theme of reverent submission to Yahweh. It seeks to understand what it means to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” in the midst of ordinary daily life (Deut 6:5).

Proverbs is about loving God in the everyday world of family and friends, neighbors and strangers, seducers and users, bullies and bosses. Proverbs says a lot about money, sex and power, but not in ways we are necessarily accustomed to. We are not lectured regarding our work ethic, eating habits or use of leisure time, but instead we are challenged by a blizzard of striking word pictures and penetrating perspectives to re-examine the wisdom or the foolishness of our lives. Proverbs impresses us with the life altering consequences of our choices. Even though at the time we may think our decisions are no big deal, choosing between wisdom and folly will prove life changing.

By avoiding a topical and pedantic presentation, the seemingly random arrangement of insights eludes our defenses and hits home. It is the difference between attending a lecture and going out for lunch with the professor. Lectures are important for education, but the insights that shape our lives tend to come to us randomly, unexpectedly, in an otherwise uneventful conversation. Proverbs is to wisdom what actual farming is to agricultural students, or what the ER is to the doctor. Theoretical knowledge gives way to applied wisdom and the luxury of safely specializing on one particular problem is no longer an option. The range of medical issues confronting an emergency room doctor is a good analogy for the range of wisdom issues confronting the follower of Jesus everyday. Proverbs teaches us “that the way we think of and respond to God is the practical thing we do. In matters of everyday practicality, nothing, absolutely nothing, takes precedence over God” (Peterson, Proverbs, p.5). The wide-angled picture of salvation history frames the perspective, but the focus in Proverbs is on need-to-know, down-to-earth applied wisdom for today. Jesus taught us to pray, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10) and the purpose of Proverbs is to guide us in this on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven everyday living (Peterson, Proverbs, p.5).

Life Makes Up Its Mind

Wisdom’s story begins at home. The first collection of Proverbs (1-9) concentrates on the family and offers practical commentary on the challenge given to parents in Deuteronomy. Parents who have taken the Word of God to heart, naturally seek to impress their children with the wisdom of God. They do this whether their kids are going off to kindergarten or to college. At dinner they talk about issues like integrity, respect, greed, and hard work. They discuss the influence of peer pressure and R-rated movies, and dialogue about the evening news. They intentionally bring to

the table God-perspectives that shape their family's decisions and priorities. Knowing and obeying God's will becomes so real and evident in the life of the family that it's as if they had taken these God-centered perspectives, principles and practices and nailed them to their front door or set up a billboard on their front lawn. That is not to suggest that they wear their faith on a tee-shirt or plaster it on a bumper sticker, but it is to say that their character and witness are as clearly evident as if they had, and a whole lot more authentic.

There is a subtle progression moving from adolescence to single adult, to marriage and then to middle age in the first nine chapters. Wisdom's parental appeal offers an alternative to self-destructive peer pressure and gang violence. "My son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths; for their feet rush into sin, they are swift to shed blood" (1:15-16). If wisdom is earnestly sought and valued "discretion will protect you and understanding will guard you" (2:11). "It will save you from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words, who has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God" (2:16-17). Wisdom guides sexual conduct and warns against the illicit relationships that seduce the soul. Life and death consequences flow from these relational decisions. "None who go to her return or attain to the paths of life" (2:19).

Wisdom acquired young is also significant for a successful career and is essential for setting values. "My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity" (3:1-2). Most of Christ's followers become aware of Proverbs 3:5-6 when they are young and in the throes of seeking to know the will of God for their lives. "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." No one ever outgrows the importance of this challenge and promise, but the context in Proverbs underscores its special relevance for those embarking on a career, setting their financial priorities, and learning to cope with setbacks. "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in" (3:11). Although wisdom may lead to material success it is always more valuable than material success. "Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better than gold" (3:13-14).

Wisdom stretches the imagination of the career adult to realize that the small world of work and success, blessing and burden, is part of the Lord's great work of creation. "By wisdom the Lord laid the earth's foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place; by his knowledge the deeps were divided and the clouds let drop the dew" (3:19-20). Wisdom establishes confidence. "Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being snared" (3:25-26). Wisdom commands compassion. "Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act. Do not say to your neighbor, 'Come back later; I'll give it tomorrow' — when you now have it with you" (3:27-28). Wisdom calls for justice. "Do not plot harm against your neighbor, who lives trustfully near you" (3:29). In its entirety, Proverbs 3 can be seen as a comprehensive sketch of a twenty-something professional who is learning what it means to "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" in all the amazing and often

disconcerting complexity of life.

Wisdom goes full circle. Marriage and career invariably lead to children and the responsibility to pass wisdom from one generation to the next. “Listen, my sons, to a father’s instruction... When I was a boy in my father’s house, still tender, and an only child of my mother, he taught me and said, ‘Lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands and you will live. Get wisdom, get understanding...’” (4:1-5). Of course, wisdom faces stiff competition. The path of the wicked is alluring and plenty of evil people seem dedicated to causing others to fall. This calls for diligence and discipline. “My son, pay attention to what I say...Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk far from your lips. Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you” (4:20-25).

Marital fidelity is not only central to the joy of marriage and the integrity of the family in Proverbs, but it represents fidelity to wisdom itself. Wisdom, as we have seen, is profoundly relational, not on two planes, divine and human, vertical and horizontal, but in one fully integrated life which unites loving God with all our being and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Proverbs contends that one of the primary manifestations of the fear of the Lord, and perhaps the most important, is marital fidelity. The people of God honor their covenant with Yahweh by honoring for-as-long-as-our-lives-shall-last covenant-keeping in marriage. Adultery stands for more than the tragic break-up of marriage; it stands for the people’s refusal to keep covenant with Yahweh. To fall for the seductive ways of the adulteress is to forfeit life itself. “At the end of your life you will groan, when your flesh and body are spent. You will say, ‘How I hated discipline! How my heart spurned correction! I would not obey my teachers or listen to my instructors. I have come to the brink of utter ruin in the midst of the whole assembly’” (5:11-14).

Given *both* Solomon’s personal history and our culture’s easy acceptance of sexual promiscuity, the dire consequences attributed to adultery may seem extreme to some. Our culture’s “no-big-deal” attitude toward sexual immorality contradicts the radical teaching of Proverbs that warns of such behavior destroying wisdom at its foundations. “For a man’s ways are in full view of the Lord, and he examines all his paths. The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast. He will die for lack of discipline, led astray by his own great folly” (5:21-23). It must seem naive to many in our culture, as it undoubtedly did to Solomon in his day, that Proverbs should hold to such an optimistic view of marriage. “May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer—may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love.” Given the joys of marriage, Proverbs asks, “Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress?” (5:18-20). The repeated warning against the seduction of the adulteress in Proverbs should eliminate any notion of naivete regarding human depravity. Clearly Proverbs took this grave danger seriously and saw it as the epitome of foolishness and deadly evil (6:20-29; 7:1-27). Sexual immorality symbolized the pursuit of folly and the breakdown of wisdom.

Lady Wisdom and Madame Folly

Proverbs may provoke our gender sensitivity by constantly referring to a son receiving parental instruction without any mention of a daughter. We might also be bothered by repeated references to a female seducer in absence of any comment about a male predator. Today, of course, we

would make gender inclusiveness explicit, but it is safe to assume that Proverbs did not intend to exclude women from instruction nor imply that sexual immorality was initiated only by women. Proverbs balanced the male mentoring motif by developing the female personification of wisdom. The Hebrew noun for wisdom is feminine, lending itself to a wealth of powerful images that were used to emphasize wisdom's beauty and appeal. Instead of presenting wisdom as an abstraction, as we in the West might do, Proverbs personified wisdom and folly and wove the story of Lady Wisdom and Madame Folly into its developmental approach from early childhood to mature adult. The skillfully crafted medium of layered metaphors were designed to draw the listener into the subject of wisdom by offering high-impact visual images and stirring deep psychological feelings.

Lady Wisdom makes her appeal in broad daylight. In the middle of life's traffic she gets everyone's attention and shouts out, "Simpletons! How long will you wallow in ignorance? Cynics! How long will you feed your cynicism? Idiots! How long will you refuse to learn? About face! I can revise your life. Look, I'm ready to pour out my spirit on you; I'm ready to tell you all I know. As it is, I've called, but you've turned a deaf ear; I've reached out to you, but you've ignored me" (1:22-23, *The Message*). Lady Wisdom sends no mixed messages. She is filled with passion; she cajoles, exhorts, pleads, and promises. In spite of people's apathy and rejection, she continues to make her appeal. Her image is larger and more intense than the most impassioned parent; she delivers her message to society as a whole. Everyone is in her audience and no one can avoid her message.

The first collection of proverbs (1-9) has parallel descriptions of Lady Wisdom's appeal (1:20-33; 8:1-36). In both passages the case is made for wisdom's universal accessibility. "Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights along the way, where the paths meet, she takes her stand; beside the gates leading into the city, at the entrances, she cries aloud: To you, O men, I call out; I raise my voice to all mankind" (8:1-4). Both passages end on a similar note, promising life: "...Whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm" (1:33); "Whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the Lord. But whoever fails to find me harms himself; all who hate me love death" (8:35-36). But in spite of the intentional parallel between these two texts, the description of Lady Wisdom in the eighth chapter suddenly and unexpectedly offers her credentials by poetically describing her relationship with Yahweh before and during creation.

"The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work, before his deeds of old; I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began. When there were no oceans, I was given birth, when there were no springs abounding with water; before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given birth, before he made the earth or its fields or any dust of the world. I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, when he gave the sea its boundary so the waters would not overstep his command, and when he marked out the foundations of the earth. Then I was the craftsman at his side. I was filled with delight day after day,

rejoicing always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind” (8:22-31).

The practical, down-to-earth wisdom of Proverbs, so indispensable for making it in the world, is the very same wisdom God used when he made the world. If the Lord God has done nothing without wisdom how much more should we do nothing without it (see Kidner, p.79). Proverbs begins wisdom’s story in the home, but then leads us back to Genesis and links wisdom with the eternal attributes of the Lord God, Maker of heaven and earth. Lady Wisdom serves to present wisdom without abstraction, but the description of wisdom in chapter eight is so exalted and so one with Yahweh that it quietly eclipses the metaphor and overshadows the personification. The message transcends the literary medium and anticipates the fuller revelation of the New Testament which speaks of the Person of Christ “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3). The followers of Jesus cannot read Proverbs 8 without reflecting on the opening of the apostle John’s gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (Jn 1:1-3). We agree with the apostle Paul, “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.” (Rom 11:33-36).

Having pushed beyond the limits of wisdom personified (8:22-31), Proverbs now returns to its comparison of Lady Wisdom and Madame Folly by finishing this tapestry of carefully woven metaphors with a picture of two rival feasts and two very different hosts. Lady Wisdom has established her home and hewn out seven pillars; her habitation is a picture of strength and stability. She “has prepared her meat and mixed her wine; she has also set her table” (9:2). Her invitation goes out “from the highest point of the city” (9:3). “Let all who are simple come in here!” she says to those who lack judgment. “Come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of understanding” (9:4-6). By contrast, Madame Folly “is loud; she is undisciplined and without knowledge. She sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the highest point of the city, calling out to those who pass by, who go straight on their way” (9:13-15). Her invitation is identical to Lady Wisdom’s, “Let all who are simple come in here!” she says to those who lack judgment.” But her copy-cat invitation cannot conceal her seduction. Her feast of bread and water, if you can call it a feast, amounts to cheap fast food, eaten on the run. It can’t be compared to Wisdom’s feast of meat and wine. Madame Folly is the evil opposite of everything good in Lady Wisdom. She’ll teach her guests how to steal and deceive. She’ll give them a good time but they will pay for it later. “They don’t know about all the skeletons in her closet, that all her guests end up in hell” (9:18, The Message). The choice is ours, Lady Wisdom or Madame Folly. Either “live wisely and wisdom will permeate your life” or “mock life and life will mock you” (9:12, The Message).

The imagery of the meal causes the follower of Jesus to reflect on the Lord’s invitation, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last

day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him” (Jn 6:54-56). Who would have thought that Wisdom’s invitation would come at such a terrible price? Who would have anticipated that the table set before us would be fulfilled in the Eucharist? Because of the Cross, Christ Jesus “has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption” (1 Cor 1:30).

Mixing-It-Up

In the sections that follow (10:1-22:16; 22:17-24:34; 25:1-29:27; 30:1-31:9) the style changes from carefully crafted stories to terse statements. It’s as if we had switched from viewing a full-length feature film to examining brilliantly shot still photos. The editors decided to mix-it-up by delivering mini-word pictures in rapid-fire succession covering a full range of life’s issues. This is wisdom’s pedagogical equivalent to flash-cards. Proverbs covers the gamut of moral issues that we randomly face everyday. Wisdom is not learned one issue at a time. We don’t master integrity and then move on to the subject of speech, followed by the need for a work ethic. Life doesn’t give us the luxury of compartmentalizing our moral life. Applied wisdom is essentially a *unified field theory* that handles a multitude of issues constantly bombarding us from every imaginable direction. Proverbs mixes-it-up so we get a true feel for the issues as well as the nature of the challenges we face.

The writers and editors drew from a variety of sources for insight. Solomon was a major contributor along with Egyptian (22:17-24:34) and Arabian sources (30:1-31:9). Those who compiled Proverbs wisely followed the principle that all truth is God’s truth wherever it is found. Commenting on the relationship between Proverbs (22:17-23:14) and the *Egyptian Teaching of Amenemope*, Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner wrote, “If Proverbs is the borrower here, the borrowing is not slavish but free and creative. Egyptian jewels, as at the Exodus, have been re-set to their advantage by Israelite workmen and put to finer use” (Kidner, Proverbs, p.24). By recognizing wisdom in other traditions and including some of these reflections in Proverbs, the Spirit led editors acknowledged the universality of God’s grace. The sheer wonder of the Creator’s wisdom is a shared human experience. “There are three things that are too amazing for me, four I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden” (30:18-19). Also, there is considerable agreement among all cultures on the importance of integrity, parental discipline, hard work, and deferred gratification. We are not surprised to find that both Egyptian and Israelite cultures warned against envy, greed, drunkenness, and selfishness. Nor are we surprised that King Lemuel’s Arabian mother would warn him against chasing women and getting drunk so that he could fulfill his royal responsibilities. She advised him, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy” (31:8-9). It was surely wise for the writers of Proverbs to tap into this shared moral vision and include these perspectives under the motto, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (9:10).

By mixing-it-up the writers and editors purposefully covered the range of issues that daily confront us. We might have thought that Proverbs should be arranged topically. All the proverbs related to money, wealth and poverty could have been grouped together and all those that

referred to integrity, speech and slander could be put together. But the editors intentionally jumbled up all the issues together in the same dialogue. Proverbs is much more like a free-flowing, no-holds-bared dialogue than a logical point-by-point university lecture. Wisdom covers the waterfront from integrity to investment strategies and from gossip to grief. Wisdom embraces the full range of moral concerns in the same way that life dishes them out.

A frequent and consistent study of Proverbs is useful in reminding us of particular issues that we can easily forget or ignore. For example, we may be sensitive to the sins of slander and gossip, and work at keeping our tongue in check, but we may be insensitive to issues related to money and wealth. The person who refuses to lie may also refuse to give to the poor. But the wisdom of Proverbs not only affirms the importance of speaking the truth in love, it makes us more aware of pursuing justice for the poor and being compassionate with our resources. It is impossible to read Proverbs alertly without becoming more sensitive to the ways our behavior should become more Christ-like. It is both convicting and consoling for it affirms our moral strengths and exposes our moral weaknesses. Proverbs provokes rather than placates our conscience and comforts our souls without rendering us complacent. Read thoughtfully and prayerfully, Proverbs helps not only to solve problems, but it raises problems! It's like receiving a thorough physical or conducting a full audit, strengths are affirmed and weaknesses are detected, but all of it is need-to-know insight.

Working the Angles

Commentators have trouble elaborating on Proverbs' pithy one-liners simply because these sayings leave little doubt as to their meaning. Like a picture, a proverb is worth a thousand words. And Proverbs is a gallery of amazing pictures dedicated to God-fearing wisdom. As we walk through the gallery the impact of the whole is far greater than the sum of its individual parts. The simplicity of Proverbs resists a simplistic response to life's complexity, and its moral depth exposes the pitfalls of moralistic and legalistic attitudes. For this reason we cannot isolate a few select proverbs and choose to concentrate on these alone. We have to walk through the whole gallery before we grasp the truth about any particular moral issue. Every proverb needs the commentary of other proverbs to get the big picture. That is why it is so important to read Proverbs in its context rather than lift a few of its lines out of context. Without trying to explain every picture in the gallery, we can consider a few examples.

Proverbs covers poverty from a number of angles. "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth" (10:4) is obviously not the whole truth about poverty, and it would be a sin if we thought it was. Proverbs must have the freedom to expose the ways of the sluggard without the reader jumping to the conclusion that all poverty is the result of laziness. The slothful earn their poverty, but Proverbs has much more to say about the wealthy oppressor who victimizes the poor and holds them down than it says about the people who deserve to be poor. "He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God" (14:31). "He who mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker; whoever gloats over disaster will not go unpunished" (17:5). "A ruler who oppresses the poor is like a driving rain that leaves no crops" (28:3). The wealthy oppressor is warned to change his ways or face poverty. "He who oppresses the poor to increase his wealth and he who gives to the rich—both

come to poverty” (22:16). “He who increases his wealth by exorbitant interest amasses it for another, who will be kind to the poor” (28:8). God is on the side of the poor. “Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court, for the Lord will take up the case and will plunder those who plunder them” (22:22-23). “He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses” (28:27). “The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern” (29:7). Laziness is only one source of poverty, but oppression and disaster are others and require a very different response from those who have the power to act (3:27). There is far more said in Proverbs about caring for the poor than condemning the poor. “He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done” (19:17). “If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered” (21:13). “A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor” (22:9). Obviously no one can escape their responsibility to the poor by glibly quoting, “Misfortune pursues the sinner, but prosperity is the reward of the righteous” (13:21). The simple truth of the proverb stands, but it is best to draw our judgments in the light of the whole picture.

On the subject of speech and communications Proverbs is as timely in the 21st century as it was a millennium before Christ. It is still true: “The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly” (15:2). The importance of the tongue can hardly be overstated. “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit” (18:21). The worldwide web and the Internet have only intensified the need for wisdom. The medium has changed but the message remains the same. “The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit” (15:4). Technology’s amazing reach and the ability to preserve everything and anything communicated on tape or on a hard-drive has only accentuated the need for truth and the danger of deception. “The lips of the wise spread knowledge; not so the hearts of fools” (15:7). Proverbs believes in the power of communication for good and evil. “With his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous escape” (11:9). “The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood, but the speech of the upright rescues them” (12:6). The daily demand to communicate, not only personally, but by cell phone and computer, has compounded the impact of both wisdom and perversity. The “reckless words” that “pierce like a sword” can be transmitted globally in seconds (12:18). Technology only intensifies the truth of Proverbs. “The speech of a good person clears the air; the words of the wicked pollute it” (10:32, *The Message*).

Now more than ever we need the wisdom of Proverbs. The perverse and penetrating impact of gossip, slander, lying, flattery, and foolish talk are no less acceptable today when they are communicated by satellite and Internet, than when delivered face-to-face. The impersonal medium of technology does not justify lowering the standards of personal communication, in either the words we speak or in the messages we receive. Proverbs declares, “Stay away from a foolish man, for you will not find knowledge on his lips” (14:7), and warns against “a chattering fool” (10:10). These are pertinent proverbs for disciplining our access to music, movies, television and Internet chat rooms. Proverbs insists that all communication is personal and reflects the heart. “The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked” (10:11). “The tongue of the righteous is choice silver, but the heart of the

wicked is of little value” (10:20). The real source for true and effective communication is not technological, but spiritual. “A wise man’s heart guides his mouth, and his lips promote instruction” (16:23). Wisdom advises us to choose our words well. “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (15:1). “He who guards his lips guards his soul, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin” (13:3). “The wise in heart are called discerning, and pleasant words promote instruction” (16:21).

As we have said, Proverbs should be read as a lively dialogue on a full range of moral issues, with each topic viewed from various angles, yet seen together in a dynamic whole. Some readers are quick to react against the optimism and positive tone of select proverbs. Many proverbs sound like simple statements of fact, such as, “The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry but he thwarts the craving of the wicked” (10:3). Or, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it” (22:6). Are these proverbs simple guarantees from God that can be repeated in spite of contradictory facts? Are we justified in feeling disappointed with God if we go hungry or can’t pay our medical bills or a son or daughter rebels? Has God let us down? We all know situations where the Lord has permitted righteous people to go hungry and wicked people to thrive. And everyone knows of a prodigal son or daughter who has grown up in a loving, well-disciplined home. Do these facts of life invalidate the promises. This is where the context of Proverbs as a whole helps us to read these positive indicative statements accurately. As a rule, God does provide. The picture of the Lord caring for the needs of the righteous is a true picture. What the proverb does is frame that truth in a one line statement. Are there exceptions to the rule? Yes, of course. Other proverbs speak of the righteous being rescued from trouble (11:8) and crying out to the Lord in their need (see 15:29; 18:10). The righteous find their refuge in the way of the Lord (10:29) and even in death they are safe in the Lord (14:32). Proverbs understands that the righteous can fall victim to injustice and oppression, but that does not change the true picture that the Lord “blesses the home of the righteous” (3:33).

“Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it” (22:6) is a comforting promise for wise Christian parents who pour themselves into the lives of their children. Is it a true promise? Yes. Is it an absolute guarantee that good parenting produces mature God-fearing children? No. First of all, no parent, with a modicum of honesty, claims that their training is perfect. Proverbs contends that parenting is a real challenge. “Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death” (19:18, see 23:13-14). And then there is the well-known proverb, “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him” (13:24). A recipe for failure is to let a child grow up without discipline and direction. “The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left to itself disgraces his mother” (29:15). But Proverbs never envisions discipline being the chief means of training a child. The key to mentoring is teaching and practicing the Word of God (the Law) in such a way that our children are impressed with the true beauty and wisdom of God’s way. Proverbs emphasizes tenderness and loving care and in no way condones abuse or harsh treatment. Parents in Proverbs are constantly encouraging, cajoling, expecting, and yes, even demanding that children “pay attention and gain understanding” (4:1). The message is repeated over and over again, “My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart” (3:1).

But no matter how wise and loving a parent has been “even the best training cannot instill wisdom, but only encourage the choice to seek it” (Kidner, p.51). Because, like us, our children are given the same freewill to choose or reject God and his wisdom. “A wise son heeds his father’s instruction, but a mocker does not listen to rebuke” (13:1). Children can choose to respect their parents or mock them. “A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish man despises his mother” (15:20). Children can cultivate a work ethic or insist on being lazy. “He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son” (10:5). Such is human depravity that even a child nurtured in a good home can turn on his parents. “He who robs his father and drives out his mother is a son who brings shame and disgrace” (19:26). All of these pictures hang in the gallery of wisdom, right along side wonderful pictures of blessings. True wisdom requires seeing an issue from many angles in order to gain the proper perspective, but that does not rule out the credibility of the confident optimism found in Proverbs.

Wisdom’s Life Picture

Proverbs concludes wisdom’s story with a carefully crafted portrait of a woman who fears the Lord. If we were unfamiliar with the tenor and tone of Proverbs we might have anticipated some sage advice or a special description of the king as an exemplary model for wisdom, but instead, we see a woman whose whole life is clearly and compellingly shaped by her fear of the Lord. This acrostic poetic portrait, with its 22 lines corresponding with the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, is not a fragment attached to the end. On the contrary, it is the climactic, closing illustration that brings the message of “on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven” wisdom home.

The confidence and competence that this woman exudes is derived from her fear of the Lord. Her sense of awe and reverence for God overcomes her fears of inferiority, intimidation, self-doubt and timidity. By fearing the Lord she is neither insecure around her husband or frustrated by changing circumstances. She faces each day as well as the future with confidence. Through dependence upon Yahweh and devotion to him she gains an essential perspective for dealing with life. The fear of the Lord has enlarged this woman’s world. She is free to enjoy and contribute to her husband’s success and her children’s security. She shows compassion to the poor and cares for those who work under her authority. She is creative, energetic, and wise. She and her husband work as a team. She manages the household, invests in real estate, and plans for the future. The fear of the Lord has liberated this woman in ways that the modern woman envies. Her life is full and her world is whole, because her character is rooted in the wisdom of God.

Proverbs meant for us to be encouraged by this noble woman, not intimidated by her. If people of wisdom and character provoke resentment or frustration within us, the problem lies not with them, but with us. We could either envy this wise woman for her happy marriage, respectful children, profitable business and energetic creativity, or we could learn from her. The choice is ours. Some people spend considerable energy trying to win the favor of people in general, rather than the people they know. *Fame* is name recognition among the masses, but *family* is caring for those you love and being loved by those who care. This woman of wisdom is praised and honored by those who know her best. “Her children arise and call her blessed.” In our mind’s

imagination we can create this scene. The family is gathered and a daughter, speaking from her heart and without embarrassment, praises her mother with the dignity and devotion she deserves. A son stands and speaks up for her because he is proud of her. They acknowledge her wisdom, creativity, energy, and love, not with superlatives, but with a single God-centric word. They call her *blessed!* Her life is an expression of God's work, God's love, and God's blessing. She is defined not by what she has achieved, but by what she has received from the hand of God.

Her husband also, praises her. He's a discerning man. He draws a comparison that puts his finger right on the key difference: "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all." The contrast he identifies is the difference between a woman of noble character, who fears the Lord, and a woman who simply does nice things. The measure of this woman is not an itemized list of the things she does, but who she is. Here is a woman who ages with grace and becomes more, not less, over time. Her beauty is not skin deep, but from the soul, reflected in everything she does. She is neither the self-made independent modern woman, nor the small-minded male-dominated housewife. To praise her is to praise her Lord. Everything she has comes from the Lord, but that in no way distracts from the honor she deserves in and outside the home. "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate" (31:30-31).

The conclusion of Proverbs opens with a question, "A wife of noble character who can find?" The question could be read in various ways. Does it mean that Lady Wisdom is impossible to find? Or does it mean that when we find her, we should realize her incomparable value and give her all the dignity and praise she deserves. It takes wisdom to value what is truly valuable and praise what is truly praiseworthy, so that our children may learn what it means to fear the Lord and grow up in Christ.

The more we reflect on Proverbs the more we discover that this book is an invaluable exposition of applied wisdom based on Old Testament commands, as well as an insightful foreshadowing of New Testament discipleship. There is a marked affinity in Proverbs with Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and with the spiritual direction given in the epistle of James. Biblical wisdom is consistent throughout God's Salvation History, reflecting the profound truth that "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the [person] of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16). Anyone who is intent on following Jesus will discover a most valuable resource in Proverbs. For as Jesus said, "Wisdom is proved right by her actions" (Mt 11:19).