

Introduction to Wisdom Books

When you hear of wisdom literature, Proverbs probably comes to mind. However, other books are part of this category too. The wisdom books consist of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and some of the psalms. While each of these books is stylistically distinct, they are grouped together as “wisdom” books because they have this theme in common: they exist to impart wisdom to the hearers. Let’s begin by defining wisdom from a biblical perspective. What is wisdom?

As we prepare ourselves to more effectively study and understand these books, we must first warn of some common pitfalls. There are three common ways wisdom literature is “abused” by readers:

1. Reading it in bits and pieces without considering the surrounding context (when applicable) or the overall message of the passage.
2. Misunderstanding terms and categories of Hebrew wisdom and styles/literary modes.

Proverbs 14:7 - *“Leave the presence of a fool, or you will not discern words of knowledge.”*

- What is the meaning of fool? (consider Psalm 14:1)
- How far must you stay from their presence? (consider 1 Corinthians 5:9-11)

3. Citing a misunderstanding as truth.

Job 15:20 - *“The wicked man writhes in pain all his days, and numbered are the years stored up for the ruthless.”*

In this lesson, we will do our best to avoid these traps as we discuss the subject of wisdom generally and then each of the books that comprise wisdom literature specifically.

Who is Wise?

Seeking wisdom (identifying what the wise choice would be) has been a common pursuit throughout human history. Although the motivation for wise choices varies, there remains a high demand for wisdom “literature.” Self-help books, conferences hosted by gurus, life-coaches, etc... are all examples of the modern-day pursuit of wisdom.

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From a worldly perspective, wisdom is found in making the choices that provide you with the best results. This sounds great, but the problem is with the desire or goal the individual has in mind. If their motivation is to achieve worldly success, it is a hollow goal.

Just as with beauty, wisdom is often defined by the eye of the beholder. Different people would identify different choices as being wise. The Bible addresses this issue head on with passages like Proverbs 1:7 and Psalm 9:10.

Proverbs 1:7 - *“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”*

Proverbs 9:10 - *“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”*

Biblically, the only good choice is a godly choice (one with the glory of God as its aim). Also, wisdom only exists when it is obeyed.

In other words, knowing the right answer doesn't make you wise; doing the right thing for the glory of God is the definition of wisdom.

God promises true wisdom to those who seek it (James 1:2-8). Ultimately, godly wisdom is more about the heart than the head (James 3:13-18, 1 Kings 3:9-12, Proverbs 4:23). When our heart is directed toward sin, our spiritual eyes are blinded and we have a hard time discerning what is right.

Assuming our heart is pure, where do we go for wisdom? There are a few sources endorsed by God's Word that can generally prove to be useful in this pursuit.

- Wise men/women (Titus 1:5-9, 2:3-4) –
- Parents (Proverbs 1:8, 4:1-2) –
- Colleagues (2 Timothy 2:22) –
- Poetry –

The poetical wisdom of the Bible will be our focus in this lesson.

Wisdom in the Proverbs

Proverbs are “memorable maxims,” a short statement that summarizes truths about practical attitudes and behaviors. All things being equal, they are basic truths that will help a person grow into a mature Christian.

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Unfortunately, proverbs are commonly abused. Most errors derive from a misunderstanding of the nature of proverbs. For example the shorter the proverb is, the less precise it usually is. “Look before you leap” is a great illustration. This modern-day proverb is short and easy to remember and contains some basic wisdom; but there is a lot it doesn’t tell you. Look for what? Leap into what? How do we apply this? These questions don’t render the proverb useless, but it does teach us that application of the proverb will require interpretation and insight. Consider the following proverbs and discuss the appropriate application.

Proverbs 6:27-29 –

Proverbs 16:3 –

Guidelines for Studying Proverbs

1. Proverbs are not legal guarantees from God

One of the most basic misunderstandings about proverbs is that they are not legal guarantees from God. They present general truths about life that are subject to the sovereignty of God over human circumstances.

Consider the following passages and answer the questions associated with each passage.

Proverbs 22:26–27 - *“Do not be among those who give pledges, among those who become guarantors for debts. If you have nothing with which to pay, why should he take your bed from under you?”* Will someone who serves as a guarantor of another’s debt always end up having to pay?

Proverbs 15:25 - *“The LORD will tear down the house of the proud, but He will establish the boundary of the widow.”* Does the Lord always protect widows from their oppressors? (see Ezekiel 22:6-7)

Proverbs 22:6 - *“Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.”* Does the Bible give us a guaranteed formula that will consistently turn out godly children?

If you have answered yes to these questions, you may have fallen into a common trap. Proverbs do not give us guarantees; they show us the path of wisdom: how to be pleasing to God. We learn from these proverbs that being a guarantor is risky; the Lord is on the side of the oppressed; and that godly parenting is more successful than careless parenting. However, these proverbs do not guarantee results. There are those who have been guarantors and escaped without having to pay off another’s debt. There are widows who have been abused in this world. There are also godly parents who despite their best efforts have raised children that rebelled against God.

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If this deeply shakes you, consider this. It is human nature to desire a formula or principles that will give us guaranteed results. Man's tendency is to use God (or a god of their design) as a vending machine in which they can put "works" in and get the product of their choosing out. God is not a formulary for success; He is someone to be worshipped.

2 Corinthians 5:9 reminds us that in all things, our goal should be to please Him. Most of the time, we will see the proverbs realized before us. There are times however, in which God deviates from the "formula." Yet, in every circumstance, His design is for our good and the good of others as well (Romans 8:28-29). Consider the lives of Joseph and Job.

Sometimes godly people face great difficulty, but always for a great purpose.

2. Check the Context

It is a common tendency to consider Proverbs as a collection of stand-alone passages that have no connection or organization. That is not true. Although there are portions of Proverbs that appear to be collections of sayings, even those sections typically have a theme that spans several passages, allowing the reader to gain a better perspective on a single subject. Consider the following example.

Proverbs 6:4 - *"Give no sleep to your eyes, nor slumber to your eyelids;"*

Read alone, this passage would appear to be a command for insomnia, or perhaps for extraordinary diligence that would drive us to neglect rest. However, this interpretation removes the passage from its context. Consider the larger perspective.

Proverbs 6:1–5 - *"My son, if you have become surety for your neighbor, have given a pledge for a stranger, if you have been snared with the words of your mouth, have been caught with the words of your mouth, do this then, my son, and deliver yourself; since you have come into the hand of your neighbor, go, humble yourself, and importune your neighbor. Give no sleep to your eyes, nor slumber to your eyelids; deliver yourself like a gazelle from the hunter's hand and like a bird from the hand of the fowler."*

Read in its larger context, we realize that the point of Proverbs 6:4 is that if you realize you have put yourself under a foolish obligation, you should make it a high priority to get out of the obligation if possible. This is just one example of many passages in Proverbs that are intended to be a part of a whole, rather than an isolated unit.

3. Proverbs sometimes place a higher priority on being memorable than on being practically accurate

This sounds like a strange thing to say about God's Word. Let me provide you an example of a passage that is sometimes misapplied because of this concept. Read through Proverbs 31:10-31, commonly known as the description of the virtuous woman.

What you may not realize is that each verse in this passage is an acrostic, a poem in which the first letter in the first word of each verse spells out a word or phrase. In this case, it is an "A to Z" of the

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Hebrew alphabet. This point of the passage is to provide illustrations of virtue exhibited in a godly woman's life, arranged in a manner that can be memorable (A to Z). Although the passage refers to the "virtuous woman" in singular, the point is not to establish a bar of deeds or accomplishments that every woman must attain to be virtuous. Misunderstanding the intent of the passage can produce more Martha than Mary, by heaping up unrealistic expectations upon women (see Luke 10:38-42).

Proverbs Challenge

Try your hand at writing your own proverb. Identify a truth that you have learned through practical experience or observation that is consistent with God's Word, and think of a way to express it that is concise and memorable.

Wisdom in Job

At first glance, Job may not seem like wisdom literature, but rather an Old Testament narrative. It certainly has qualities of a narrative, but it really belongs in the class of wisdom literature because of its subject matter. The focal point of Job is the age-old question of mankind, "Why would a good God allow bad things to happen to 'good' people"? This question isn't just encountered in Job; we find it in the New Testament, even among those who should have known better (see John 9:1-3, Luke 13:1-5). Job actually serves as an important counter-balance to the book of Proverbs because it defies the "formula" mentality we warned against. We see a very godly man suffering terrible loss in this life.

One of the most challenging aspects of Job is to remember that not everything written in this book is good. Job has some well-intentioned friends who "darken counsel by words without knowledge" (Job 38:2). Their error was the first thing the Lord points out to Job when He appears in a whirlwind. The bad advice from Job's friends actually makes things worse because they frustrated Job and drove him into a place of despair and anguish towards God. We learn an important lesson: no advice is better than bad advice.

The book of Job is a great place to sharpen our discernment skills, as we try to understand WHY the advice Job's friends give is bad. When you read much of what they say, it appears to be good. They appear to honor God and uphold virtue, but at the same time they accuse Job. This is the same way Satan sometimes works though; he can appear as an angel of light and say enough good to get us to drop our guard, and then inserts a lie (2 Corinthians 11:14, Genesis 3:1-5). Read Job 4-5, the first speech of Job's friend, Eliphaz. What are some of the good things he says? Where is the error?

Truth:

Error:

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As you probably learned from this exercise, discernment takes effort and attention because it is easy to be deceived when a lie is covered by so much truth. Discernment is a mark of Christian maturity (Hebrews 5:14).

The primary question of the book of Job, “Why am I suffering?” is never directly answered by God. From our perspective, we can read the account of Job’s trial and be strengthened and encouraged by God’s clear hand in the matter from the beginning to the end. However, Job didn’t see this from his perspective at the time. The way the Lord answered this question was to draw Job’s eyes from his problems to His Redeemer.

Ultimately, wisdom is not found in our ability to reason and understand; it is found by trusting in the character and sovereignty of our God.

This is exactly what Psalm 111:10 proclaims, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom...”

Innocent suffering can truly honor God. He has compassion on all those who suffer, even though they must endure great difficulty. We can derive great wisdom from Job when we rightly interpret this book.

Wisdom in Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes is a book of wisdom written by Solomon. Some of the text is reminiscent of Proverbs, but there is a definite flow of thought connecting the verses and carrying a central theme throughout the entire book. Two challenges to Ecclesiastes are that it is sometimes difficult to grasp the intent of the writer, and some of the texts appear to be self-contradicting. For example, read Ecclesiastes 3:1-11. The writer states that God has established order and a time for every purpose under heaven, yet concludes in verse 11 by stating that man will not understand God’s purposes or times.

In considering the structure of Ecclesiastes, notice that the introduction and conclusion are written in the third person (see 1:1-11 and 12:8-14), yet the remainder of the book is a monologue written in first person. The introduction and conclusion serve as bookends to provide us with an outside perspective that is important to deciphering the message of this book.

There are two common ways of viewing Ecclesiastes:

1. It is written from a cynical/sarcastic point of view, meaning that it is displaying an outlook (a pessimistic perspective) that should be avoided.
2. It is written from a more positive point of view, teaching us how to make the most of a brief life under the sun, in which all will die at the end.

Probably one of the most important words in Ecclesiastes is “vanity.” Much of how you interpret this book will hinge upon how you define vanity. Does it mean fleeting like a vapor; does it mean empty and meaningless; or is it some combination of the two? The former interpretation (brief or fleeting) lends itself to a more positive interpretation: life is short, therefore make the most of the days God gives you. The latter interpretation (empty and meaningless) is negative, implying that much of what is pursued in this life is worthless and has no enduring value.

Read the introduction (Ecclesiastes 1:1-11) and the conclusion (Ecclesiastes 12:8-14) to this book and ponder the meaning of the word “vanity.” What do you think it means? Why?

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Five points dominate this book:

1. God is the only enduring reality and the source of life and true wisdom (Eccl 3:14)
2. We don't always understand God's ways (Eccl 3:11)
3. From the human perspective, things do not always add up and do not appear to be as they should be (Eccl 5:13-14)
4. Most of the issues of life are repetitive and vanity (Eccl 1:9-10)
5. The great equalizer for all men is death (Eccl 3:19-20)

Perhaps the great point of Ecclesiastes is that God adds meaning and durability to a life that would otherwise be meaningless and fleeting (Ecclesiastes 3:12-15). This is the more positive (and in my opinion more likely) assessment of this book. Alternatively, the cynical view is rather fatalistic and discouraging, indicating that God tends to be uninvolved and distant. This view does not harmonize well with our knowledge of God who numbers the very hairs of our head and formed us in the womb!

Wisdom in the Song of Solomon

The Song of Solomon would probably be one of the last books you would consider to be wisdom literature. By its name alone, it would seem to deserve a place with the psalms. However, Solomon's writings are all categorized as wisdom literature with the exception of a few specific psalms he wrote (e.g. Psalm 72 and 127). The Song of Solomon addresses with a specific category of wisdom that arises frequently in Proverbs: the wisdom related to purity and marital fidelity.

Proverbs 2 extolls the benefits and blessings of wisdom. When God's wisdom enters your heart, discretion will guard you (verse 11) and deliver you from the evil ones who would lead you astray (verses 12-15), but also from the strange woman and adulteress who would steal your life (v16-19). This is not the only time the subject of purity and marital fidelity is broached in Proverbs. Consider Proverbs 5:15-23, 6:20-35, and 7:1-27.

I believe one of the primary points of the Song of Solomon is that purity can be maintained and true romance can be celebrated and enjoyed to its fullest extent, when it is maintained within God's original design: one man and one woman in a lifetime marital covenant relationship.

Allegorical or Historical?

Throughout history, some have debated whether the Song of Solomon is intended to be interpreted historically/literally or allegorically.¹ What would be the purpose of a historical interpretation?

What would be the purpose of an allegorical interpretation?

¹ An allegorical interpretation uncovers a hidden spiritual meaning that transcends the literal sense of the text.

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An emphasis on the allegorical approach to this book was highly favored over a significant portion of church history; but a literal-historical approach seems to be more popular now. I believe that requiring some texts to fit into strictly an allegorical or a historical box is unnatural and unnecessary. Clearly, there are passages of scripture that are meant to be read both historically and allegorically (e.g. Genesis 22:1-14; Galatians 4:21-31). Especially in regard to a passage that provides a model of godly marital love, why does it have to either exclusively teach us about marriage or exclusively give us insight into the relationship between Christ and His church? What was Paul's take on this issue in Ephesians 5:25-33?

A carefully balanced approach allows us to apply the best of both understandings of the text. The Song of Solomon provides a realistic and beautiful account of a couple that fall in love, exercise restraint in courtship, enjoy marital bliss, experience a relationship strain, and then grow in the depth of their love and maturity. Because of the purity of this relationship, there are times that the words and actions of this couple prove to be a reflection of a higher and holier love between Christ and His church, the archetype of marital love. The key to balance is to not fall into the trap of forced-allegorization. Every detail does not have to have an ulterior or deeper meaning. We do not derive doctrine from allegory. It only illustrates what is already made clear elsewhere in Scripture.

If we were to require the book to only be interpreted historically, we would miss out on these beautiful pictures. If we require the book to be interpreted allegorically, we would miss out on the practical advice and also force some passages into an allegorical model that doesn't seem to consistently fit.

Filling a Gap in Wisdom Literature

In many ways, the Song of Solomon fills a gap that exists in other wisdom literature. When the topic of marriage is addressed in Proverbs, the tone is typically a necessary warning against the dangers and consequences of impurity and infidelity. However, the tone of the Song of Solomon is much different. It espouses the same virtues as Proverbs, but focuses on extolling the beauty and joy of a godly marriage.

God isn't just trying to keep us from illicit pleasure; He is directing us to deeper pleasure that is free of guilt and the pain of sin.

The Song of Solomon shows us the beauty of wisdom lived out in real life, rather than condensed into a few carefully crafted words. We began this lesson by asking for the definition of wisdom. The answer is that wisdom is the ability to make godly choices. The Song of Solomon breathes life into its lesson by showing us the benefits of wisdom, and in doing so, paints a picture of Christ for all to see. This is the goal of godly wisdom and God has provided this treasure of wisdom books to draw us closer to that goal.