

PROVERBS

Living Word BIBLE STUDIES

PROVERBS

The Ways of Wisdom

KATHLEEN BUSWELL NIELSON



P U B L I S H I N G

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FOREWORD

Why study the Bible? And if we do study the Bible, how should we study it?

Maybe the best way to answer these questions is by seeing what the Bible says about itself.

The Bible says that it is the very Word of God, breathed out by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16–17). The one true and living God speaks to us in every word on every page. And we should reverently and joyfully recognize our awesome privilege as direct recipients of divine revelation. Therefore, we should believe that as we read and study the Bible we are hearing the voice of God. Then we will be worthy of the commendation that the apostle Paul gave to the Thessalonians: “We also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God” (1 Thess. 2:13).

The Bible also says that the God-given Word was written by real human beings, who wrote under the direction of God the Holy Spirit (see 2 Peter 1:21). The Bible was written for people like us, by people like us. Furthermore, these divinely inspired authors claimed to write with special care and the best efforts of their literary skill. For example, the writer of Ecclesiastes said that he “taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and

arranging many proverbs with great care,” and that he “sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth” (Eccl. 12:9–10).

We should read the Bible, therefore, both as a divine book and as a human book. This means recognizing and understanding the conventional literary forms in which the Bible is written: stories, poems, lists, hymns, genealogies, visions, laments, historical records, and so forth. It means that as we read, we should find pleasure and take delight in the Bible’s beauty, simplicity, and majesty. It also means that we should take as much care to study the Bible as the original authors took to write it, paying close attention to every word that was carefully chosen to fit into its proper context.

The Bible claims further that the Word of God is something we need to live. Jesus said it like this: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4; cf. Deut. 8:3). In other words, we need God’s Word as much or even more than we need our daily bread. Therefore, we should read and study the Bible every day as if our lives depended upon it.

To be more specific, the Bible says that it has the life-giving power to bring us into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. The sacred writings of Scripture “are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). The saving wisdom of Scripture is not limited to one part of the Bible or another but holds true for every book in the Old and New Testaments. What John said about his gospel is really true about the whole Bible: “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31; cf. Luke 24:25–27).

As we read and study the Bible we should look to see Jesus on every page. The Savior expected in the prophets is exhibited in the gospels, explained in the epistles, and exalted in the Reve-

lation. As we read these Scriptures by faith, therefore, we come into a personal saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

What else does the Bible say about itself? It says that God's Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105). In other words, the Bible shows us the way to go in life. In fact, the Bible tells us everything we need for godly thinking and holy living: every word of Scripture is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). The Bible is the most useful book ever written. As we read, therefore, we should be looking for practical truth that will make a difference in what we think, what we say, and what we do in every situation in life.

This study guide will give you a helpful method for studying the Bible in all the right ways. It will encourage you in the daily reading, meditation, and memorization of Scripture. It will help you to be serious and systematic about studying the Bible for yourself. It will ask you questions that help you see the literary structure, the Christ-centered meaning, and the practical implications of what you are reading. It will give you growing skill and confidence in understanding the Bible, while at the same time helping you make progress in personal holiness and deepening your love for God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. And it will help you do all of this in relationship with other members of your spiritual family—your brothers and sisters in the church.

The Proverbs are richly rewarding to study. Each wise saying we read in this book repays thoughtful reflection, and the main themes we find in Proverbs touch on all the main issues in life. Many of the individual proverbs remind us of people we know, of situations we have encountered in real life, and of the ways that we ourselves are tempted to be foolish instead of wise. If

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we read by faith, they will also remind us of Jesus Christ, who is the true wisdom of God (see I Cor. 1:30).

May the same Holy Spirit who first revealed these words to King Solomon and other learned men enable you to understand what you read, to find joy in what you study, and to return the glory to God by the way that you live.

Philip Graham Ryken

A PERSONAL WORD FROM KATHLEEN

I began to write these Bible studies for the women in my own church group at College Church in Wheaton, Illinois. Under the leadership of Kent and Barbara Hughes, the church and that Bible study aimed to proclaim without fail the good news of the Word of God. What a joy, in that study and in many since, to see lives changed by the work of the Word, by the Spirit, for the glory of Christ.

In our Bible study group, we were looking for curriculum that would lead us into the meat of the Word and teach us how to take it in, whole Bible books at a time—the way they are given to us in Scripture. Finally, one of our leaders said, “Kathleen—how about if you just write it!” And so began one of the most joyful projects of my life: the writing of studies intended to help unleash the Word of God in people’s lives. The writing began during a busy stage of my life—with three lively young boys, and always a couple of college English courses to teach—but through that stage and every busy one since, a serious attention to studying the Bible has helped keep me focused, growing, and alive in the deepest ways. The Word of God will do that. If there’s life and power in these studies, it is simply the life and power of the Scriptures to which they point. It is ultimately the life and

power of the Savior who shines through all the Scriptures from beginning to end. How we need this life in the midst of every busy and non-busy stage of our lives!

I don't think it is just the English teacher in me that leads me to this conclusion about our basic problem in Bible study these days: we've forgotten how to *read*! We're so used to fast food that we think we should be able to drive by the Scriptures periodically and pick up some easily digestible truths that someone else has wrapped up neatly for us. We've disowned that process of careful reading . . . observing the words . . . seeing the shape of a book and a passage . . . asking questions that take us into the text rather than away from it . . . digging into the Word and letting it speak! Through such a process, guided by the Spirit, the Word of God truly feeds our souls. Here's my prayer: that, by means of these studies, people would be further enabled to read the Scriptures profitably and thereby find life and nourishment in them, as we are each meant to do.

In all the busy stages of life and writing, I have been continually surrounded by pastors, teachers, and family who encourage and help me in this work, and for that I am grateful. The most wonderful guidance and encouragement come from my husband, Niel, whom I thank and for whom I thank God daily.

May God use these studies to lift up Christ and his Word, for his glory!

INTRODUCTION

A proverb is wisdom in a poetic nutshell. Many people speak of chewing on a proverb: it is small, like a nut . . . you can fit it in your memory and turn it round and round in your thoughts . . . it gives more and more flavorful meaning as you keep pondering it. “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver” (Prov. 25:11). The more you muse on it, taste it, picture it, the more it seems right and true.

Proverbs abound throughout the Bible, but books containing many proverbs make up Scripture’s wisdom literature: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. Many different wise men throughout the ancient world authored and collected writings of practical wisdom (like Proverbs) and writings of a more questioning and philosophical bent (like Ecclesiastes and Job). The three biblical books of wisdom literature have as their distinctive not only the historical context of the Jewish nation but also the inspiration of the God of Abraham—the Creator of all things and the only source of all wisdom. The primary author of Proverbs, as we shall see, was a man to whom was given a special gift of wisdom from the Lord God.

In the wisdom of this book, King Solomon and others offer divinely inspired observations concerning how to live rightly as the people of God. Proverbs’ wisdom is far from theoretical; wisdom given by our Creator relates to every part of his

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creation—from our words, to our friendships, to our money, to our marriages and children—and on and on.

The first lesson will remind us that when we read Proverbs, we are reading poetry! What a wonder that God poured out this wisdom in this form, a form that awakens our imaginations and speaks to us in ways as beautiful and varied as the scope of wisdom itself. As we examine the poetry in lesson 1, and as we digest the poetry throughout this study, let us remember to relish and to take in this part of God's revelation with thankful delight.

Unlike other studies I have written, this study does not work its way directly through the text of the whole book from beginning to end. A collection of proverbs such as makes up a large portion of this book is not organized according to a logical progression of passages; rather, it circles around various repeating themes, often moving back and forth among those themes. Therefore, the bulk of this study covers the central themes of Proverbs, gathering together and taking in the amazingly thorough and coherent clusters of wise sayings that drive home each theme. However, it is crucial to see that the whole book of Proverbs does have a central shape and theme: the introductory lessons establish the unifying structure and theme, which unite all the threads of the subsequent lessons into one beautiful pattern of seeking after and living out wisdom.

May we hear and respond to wisdom's call as we read Proverbs. May we follow her voice into the marketplace, into the church, into our bedrooms, into our kitchens—into every corner of our lives. May her words, so fitly spoken, shine for us more and more like apples of gold in settings of silver. May wisdom light up our paths, so that they shine brighter and brighter, until full day (Prov. 4:18). Finally, as we are reminded over and over again of the wisdom come down to us, the light of the world, even Jesus Christ our Lord, may we hear his voice more clearly and shine his light more brilliantly into every part of our lives and our world.



Lesson 1

NAVIGATING PROVERBS

For Memory

*Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
and the one who understands obtain guidance,
to understand a proverb and a saying,
the words of the wise and their riddles.*

Proverbs 1:5–6

It is good, before jumping into study of any book, to have a sense of its purpose, shape, and method; for Proverbs in particular, such a sense is crucial. The goal of this introductory lesson is to develop a basic acquaintance with this book, so that, as we begin to study, the many seemingly disparate proverbs and passages will find their places meaningfully within the structure and purpose of the whole book.

DAY ONE—THE CONTEXT OF WISDOM

Throughout the ancient world, many different wise men composed and collected wise sayings, often used to train young

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leaders within a nation or a people group. These wise men formed a special class of sages, distinct from prophets and priests; today, they would be less like ministers and more like counselors and philosophers.

The Bible's book of Proverbs was composed in large part by a wise man from a particular community and with a particular view of the world. What can we learn about Solomon from the following verses?

1. Proverbs 1:1

2. 2 Chronicles 1:1–13

3. 1 Kings 4:29–34

Read Proverbs 1:1–7, which forms a kind of prologue to the whole book.

First, after the author introduces himself, the next three verses introduce the many-sided treasure of wisdom, the theme of the book. List all those weighty wisdom words that cluster together alluringly in Proverbs 1:2–4. What conclusions can you draw, initially, about the nature of Proverbs' wisdom?

Next, what kind of a response to wisdom does Proverbs 1:5–6 call for, right from the start? What are the crucial words here, and what kind of an attitude do they all imply?

The climax of the prologue comes in Proverbs 1:7, which gets to the heart of the matter. Write down a list of at least ten observations about this verse, even the most basic ones.

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Note: "LORD" translates the Hebrew "Yahweh," the covenant name of God by which he revealed himself to his people. See, for example, Exodus 3:13–15.

Note: "The fear of the LORD," throughout the Scriptures, means not a frightened submission but rather a "worshipping submission," as Derek Kidner puts it, to a God who has revealed himself to his creation.*

DAY TWO—THE CONTEXT OF THE WHOLE BOOK

We have seen that this book comes out of a large tradition of wisdom literature *and* out of the specific context of the kingdom of Israel, the Lord's chosen people, to whom he gave his inspired Word. We have seen the many-sidedness of wisdom, the urgency of humbly seeking it, and the only place to start. Now, how does the book proceed? Is it just a jumble of disconnected wise sayings, as one might think at first glance?

1. Following the prologue, the first section of Proverbs includes the first nine chapters, which develop the

* Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 59.

subject of wisdom. What is the consistent context and message of this section, as shown in Proverbs 1:8, and then in each first verse of Proverbs 2–7?

The wisdom that Proverbs offers is not just for sons or noble youths at a royal court; out of that historical context comes wisdom that, through the Holy Spirit who inspired these words, is offered to every member of the kingdom of God. We will study more into the nature of this wisdom introduced in Proverbs 1–9.

2. The second and most substantive section of Proverbs, 10:1–22:16, has a title (see Prov. 10:1) and consists of a collection of Solomon's short, pithy, wise sayings, or proverbs. After this brief glimpse at the book's structure so far, how would you say the order of the sections makes sense?

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3. In Proverbs 22:17, the tone returns to that of a personal address, and the verses flow together more, as in the first section. Read Proverbs 22:17–21.
 - a. How does the speaker sound like that of section 1?

 - b. For what several end results does the speaker aim, in the life of the one who hears and applies this wisdom that has been offered?

4. Read the following verses, which introduce the several final sections of the book, and jot down your initial observations about each section as it is introduced.
 - a. Proverbs 24:23

b. Proverbs 25:1

- c. Proverbs 30:1 (Note: Nothing is known of this wise man Agur, or the next, Lemuel, except that both appear to be non-Israelites.)

d. Proverbs 31:1

Solomon, then, was the main writer of Proverbs, among several. The book reached its final form, with all editing finished, at least several hundred years after Solomon, as King Hezekiah's men were still working on it around 700 BC (Prov. 25:1).

What might be called the epilogue of Proverbs is well-known! We'll come to that "excellent wife" of Proverbs 31:10–31 in good time and in conclusion to the whole book.

DAY THREE—THE CONTEXT OF POETIC FORM

We cannot miss the fact that when we read Proverbs, we are reading poetry. First, do make sure you are using a translation that presents the poetry in discernible lines. Hebrew poetry's central characteristic is its balancing of lines or units of thought in a structure often called parallelism. Most often, two or sometimes three parallel lines balance together to create meaning. In the distinct form of a poetic proverb, usually two lines form an independent unit, a condensed, pithy poem in a nutshell.

For each of the three generally accepted kinds of parallelism explained below, look through the chapter from which the first example comes, and try to find a couple more examples of that kind.

1. *Synonymous parallelism*: The second line repeats the idea of the first line, in different words and usually adding new shades of meaning.
 - a. Proverbs 3:13
 - b.
 - c.

2. *Antithetic parallelism*: The second line presents a contrasting idea.
 - a. Proverbs 12:1
 - b.
 - c.

3. *Synthetic parallelism*: The second line continues or adds to the meaning of the first.
 - a. Proverbs 24:4
 - b.
 - c.

Even in this exercise, we see the categories are not always hard and fast. We will see also, the more we study Proverbs, that this book makes effective use of antithetic parallelism, for the one who listens to wisdom is consistently contrasted with his opposite. What is his opposite called (read Prov. 1:7, 22, 32)?

DAY FOUR—THE CONTEXT OF POETIC IMAGERY

One of the central and delightful characteristics of most poetry is imagery, or pictures—and Proverbs is no exception. In fact, the Hebrew word for “proverb” most basically means a comparison. Proverbs overflows with comparisons, as one thing is pictured in terms of another, to make the meaning vivid. All the lessons in this study will be full of examples, but—just for a taste—in the following verses, what comparison/pictures do you find?

Note: If the comparison uses “like” or “as,” it’s a simile; if not, it’s a metaphor.

1. Proverbs 11:22

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2. Proverbs 13:14

3. Proverbs 16:31

One notable kind of imagery is called personification, in which the poet pictures something nonhuman in human terms—as when the floods clap their hands and the hills sing for joy. What is personified, and how, in the following passages?

4. Proverbs 1:20–21

5. Proverbs 9:13–14

How amazing to see huge portions of the inspired Word of God given to us not in theological propositions but in poetry! How wonderful to see that the main characteristics of Hebrew poetry, the parallelism and the imagery, are characteristics that can be quite easily captured in translation—unlike other poetic characteristics such as sound and rhythm.

6. Page through several chapters of the book of Proverbs, looking for elements of the poetry we have mentioned. What are your comments and thoughts concerning this poetic side of God's revelation to us?

DAY FIVE—A PRAYER OF PREPARATION

In preparation for study of this book, pray your way through the prologue in Proverbs 1:1–7, asking God to let you know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, and so on. May the Lord indeed make us ready to hear and understand and live out the wisdom of Proverbs.

Notes for Lesson 1

