

The Three Voices of Proverbs 1

Proverbs 1:1–33

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Pastor Trent Eastman | New Baptist Church, Huntington, West Virginia

Archaeological Moment: The City Gate

Our passage tonight includes a remarkable image. In verse 20, we read:

Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks.

That phrase — “at the entrance of the city gates” — deserves more than a passing glance, because in the ancient world, a city gate was not simply a door in a wall. It was a building. A complex. A structure.

Archaeologists have excavated these gate complexes at Tel Dan in the north, at Beersheba in the south, at Gezer, Megiddo, and Hazor. The pattern is remarkably consistent. You would approach the city and pass through an outer gate into an open courtyard, then through an inner gate — typically with three chambers on each side of the passageway, six in all. Some of those chambers housed guards. But beyond the gate itself, the complex opened onto a wide paved square — what the Hebrew calls the *rechov*, the city square.

And here is what archaeology has recovered that matters most for our text tonight. At Tel Dan, just inside the gate, excavators found a stone bench built into the wall — and next to that bench, a raised platform, with socket stones still in place that once held the poles of a canopy. A throne, under a canopy, beside a bench for the elders. This is not speculation. The Bible itself tells us this is how it worked. Boaz went up “to the gate” and gathered ten elders to witness his redemption of Ruth (Ruth 4). Absalom stood “by the way of the gate” to steal the hearts of Israel (2 Samuel 15). And 2 Samuel 19 tells us plainly: the king sat in the gate.

So picture it. The gate is the courthouse. The gate is the marketplace. The gate is the town hall. It is where contracts are sealed, where the accused is tried, where the widow’s case is heard, where merchants set up their stalls, where news is exchanged, where every person coming in and every person going out must pass. One scholar put it this way: the gate was the mall, the courthouse, the army base, the television, and Facebook — all rolled into one.

That is where Lady Wisdom plants herself and raises her voice. Keep that picture in mind as we work through this chapter.

Why Study Proverbs?

Tonight we are beginning something I have wanted to do for a long time but have struggled to figure out how to approach: a study through the book of Proverbs. I have taught Proverbs as a book summary. I have taught particular sections. I have taught certain passages. But I have never really walked through the book itself and tried to capture, through sustained teaching, the wisdom that is in it.

People tend to treat Proverbs like a collection of fortune cookie sayings — a string of quotable lines by famous authors, good for a coffee mug or an Instagram post. But there is a message in this book of immense importance that is worthy of serious, careful study. So I am going to attempt it.

The reason is simple: Proverbs is about wisdom. And wisdom, in the broadest sense, is the ability to do something well. There is a wisdom for building houses and a wisdom for mechanics and a wisdom for farming. Each of these involves knowledge, skill, and the ability to apply both in the moment. Biblical wisdom is the same kind of thing, applied to the whole of life. It is the ability to live well. And wisdom is more than knowledge; it is more than following a set of instructions. It is the cultivated capacity to do something well — in this case, to live rightly.

Is this important today? I think we live in an exceptionally unwise day. There is a profound and urgent need for biblical wisdom. So let us learn.

The Purpose of the Book (Proverbs 1:1–6)

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: to know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth — 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.

We will encounter different authors as we move through Proverbs, but the first nine chapters clearly form a single, unified collection. Solomon was known for his wisdom — let us see what he teaches.

The book opens with a statement of purpose, and every word of it is carefully chosen.

“To know wisdom and instruction” — the word *know* here is not about data. It is relational knowing, the kind of knowing that comes from deep engagement rather than mere exposure. And “instruction” is the Hebrew *musar* — formative correction, the shaping of character by discipline. The goal is not information; it is formation.

“To understand words of insight” — *understand* here carries the sense of discernment, the trained ability to tell the difference between things. This is not instinct; it is a skill that must be developed.

“To receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity” — “to receive” means to take hold of, to grasp firmly. “Wise dealing” is prudent action — doing something in such a way that it actually works. “Righteousness” (*tsedeq*) is conformity to the standard. “Justice” (*mishpat*) is the fulfillment of that standard’s purpose, the care of one’s neighbor. “Equity” (*meisharim*) is straightness — no crooked dealing.

“To give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth” — “prudence” is a morally neutral word in Hebrew, meaning shrewdness, street smarts, cunning. It can be used for good or ill. The “simple” does not mean stupid; it means untested, impressionable, not yet hardened by experience — someone who is, as the Hebrew suggests, open. Open to wisdom, but also open to being taken in.

And then verse 5 does something important. It expands the audience: “Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance.” This book is not only for beginners. The word for “guidance” here — *tachbulot* — is a striking word. Its root is *chevel*, a rope or cord, the kind of line a sailor uses to steer his ship. *Tachbulot* is, literally, “steerings.” It is navigational wisdom — the capacity to steer one’s life through shifting winds. The mature person does not stop needing it. No one graduates from wisdom.

And finally, verse 6 — “to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles.” A *mashal*, a proverb, is compressed speech: meaning packed under pressure. A saying is an enigmatic turn of phrase. The riddles are word puzzles that conceal truth until the reader works to extract it. This book will require us to think. That is by design.

So, taken together, Proverbs 1:2–6 states the purpose of the whole: to give the unformed the shrewdness to live well, to train the mature in the art of steering a life, and to teach the reader how to mine wisdom from compressed, puzzling speech. It aims to form both the beginner and the sage, and to train the eye that does the reading.

The Motto of the Book (Proverbs 1:7)

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

This single verse is the motto of the entire book — the lens through which everything else must be read.

“The fear of the LORD is the *beginning* of knowledge.” Notice that word: beginning. Not the ceiling, not the pinnacle — the starting point. You cannot begin anywhere else. Every other starting point will produce a different destination. And “beginning” here also carries the sense of first principle, the foundational thing that is always present, always needed, never outgrown. It is the cornerstone that is always under the building, whether or not you remember it is there.

“Fear” means something more than respect and something less than sheer terror. It is the trembling recognition that one stands before the living God. It is what a person feels when the weight and holiness of who God actually is breaks through the noise of ordinary life.

“The LORD” — this is not generic spirituality. It is the covenant name of God, the name He gave to Moses at the burning bush. This is not wisdom about *a* god or about the universe in some abstract sense. It is wisdom rooted in relationship with the specific, personal, covenant-making God of Israel.

And notice what this means for knowledge itself. Apart from trembling reverence before the covenant God, there is no true knowing. A person may be educated, credentialed, and intellectually sharp — and still not know — because knowing begins with reverent reception of the God who is there. Every attempt to build knowledge on another foundation ends up constructing a different structure, one that cannot bear the weight of real life.

The second half of the verse turns the other direction: “fools despise wisdom and instruction.” The Hebrew word here — *evilim* — is one of several words for fool in Proverbs, and it is important to be precise. The *evil* is not the unintelligent or the uninformed. He is the morally resistant fool. His problem is not his IQ; it is his posture. He has set himself against correction.

“Despise” (*bazu*) is a strong word — to hold in contempt, to treat as worthless. The fool does not merely neglect wisdom. He scorns it. And notice what he scorns: “wisdom and instruction” — *chokmah* and *musar*, the same pair from verse 2. The fool refuses both the skill of living and the discipline that produces it. He will not be shaped. He will not be corrected. And so he cannot be wise.

This verse establishes the pattern that will structure nearly all of Proverbs: antithetical parallelism — two lines set against each other so that each illuminates the other by contrast. One man fears the LORD; another despises his word. One man stands at the beginning of knowledge; another refuses even to start. One man will be made wise; the other will remain a

fool — not by tragedy, but by choice. There is no third option in the verse. Proverbs will return to this again and again: two ways, two postures, two ends.

The First Voice: Father and Mother (Proverbs 1:8–9)

— *Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck.*

The fear of the Lord is where wisdom begins. But where does one learn the fear of the Lord? Verse 8 tells us: in the home, from both father and mother.

“Hear” — this is *shema*, the great summons of Israel, the first word of the ancient confession of Deuteronomy 6:4. *Shema* does not mean merely to let sound enter the ear. It means to hear with the intent to obey, to receive with the whole person.

“Your father's instruction” — there is that word again: *musar*. The same moral discipline named in verse 2, named again in verse 3. And recall that the fool's defining mark in verse 7 is that he despises *musar*. The son is now told where *musar* is found: in his father's house.

“Your mother's teaching” — and here the word is *torah*. The same word used for the five books of Moses. Here it is ascribed to the mother. Scripture does not reserve the transmission of wisdom for men. The mother is named as a giver of *torah*. Her voice is covenantally weighted. Together, the father's *musar* and the mother's *torah* form a complete curriculum. Proverbs assumes a home in which both parents are engaged, both are teaching, both are shaping the child.

And what will this teaching do for the son who receives it? “They are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck.” The world will tell a young man that his parents' instruction is a cage. Solomon says it is a crown. The discipline of the home, far from diminishing him, will adorn him. It will mark him as a person of consequence.

The Second Voice: The Enticers (Proverbs 1:10–19)

My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent. If they say, “Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood; let us ambush the innocent without reason; like Sheol let us swallow them alive, and whole, like those who go down to the pit; we shall find all precious goods, we shall fill our houses with plunder; throw in your lot among us; we will all have one purse” — my son, do not walk in the way with them; hold back your foot from their paths, for their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed blood.

For every word a parent speaks, there are other voices offering something different. And the voices of this world are attractive. They promise belonging. They promise excitement. They promise gain.

“Entice” comes from the same root as “simple” in verse 4. The simple man is open, impressionable. The enticer is the one who pries him open the wrong way. Proverbs is playing on this deliberately. The one who is open is precisely the one most in danger.

Notice what this invitation offers. It promises belonging — “come with us.” It promises adventure — “let us lie in wait.” It pictures the gang as something powerful, even mythic — comparing themselves to Sheol, the grave, swallowing their prey alive. And it promises wealth — “we shall fill our houses with plunder” — and shared brotherhood — “we will all have one purse.”

Belonging, adventure, power, wealth, brotherhood. That is how enticement works. It never pitches itself as evil. It pitches itself as a shorter road to something genuinely desirable.

The father’s answer is to return to the image of the path — an image that will dominate Proverbs from here forward. There are two ways, and you are on one or the other. “Hold back your foot from their paths.” Sometimes wisdom is not a thought but a step not taken.

And then Solomon delivers a sharp irony. “For in vain is a net spread in the sight of any bird.” You cannot catch a bird by laying a net on the ground in plain view — you have to be clever. But these men, for all their swagger, are not even clever. “These men lie in wait for their own blood; they set an ambush for their own lives.” They have baited a trap and walked into it themselves. Greed is not a surface sin in Proverbs. It is a life-taker. It does not merely corrupt; it consumes. The one who reaches for unjust gain does not end up holding it — it ends up holding him.

Two voices, two paths, two ends. The pattern is established. Now the chapter turns, and a third voice enters.

The Third Voice: Lady Wisdom (Proverbs 1:20–33)

Her Location (vv. 20–21)

Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks.

Four locations, and every one of them is public. The street. The open square. The busy intersection. The city gate — that complex of commerce and law and civic life we looked at tonight. Lady Wisdom is not hidden. She is not the possession of a mystic few. She does not require initiation into a secret society. She stands where ordinary life happens and raises her voice over the noise of it.

Compare her to the sinners of verses 10–14. They pulled the young man into a corner. She stands in the square. They spoke privately, conspiratorially. She proclaims publicly, openly. The contrast is deliberate: evil operates by concealment; wisdom operates by disclosure.

The verb “cries aloud” (*tarannah*) is a strong word — a ringing, piercing cry. Wisdom is not politely offering herself. She is crying out. And here is the point the passage presses: no one who ends up a fool will be able to say he was not warned. Wisdom’s voice is everywhere a person walks. At the market, at the gate, at the intersection. The question is never whether she spoke. The question is whether he listened.

Her Lament (v. 22)

“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?”

Wisdom’s first words are a lament. “How long?” — *ad-matay* — the cry of the prophets, the cry of the psalmist, the anguished question of a love that has waited and waited and waited.

She addresses three figures, and Solomon is now deploying his vocabulary of folly with precision. The “simple ones” (*petaim*) are the open, persuadable men from verse 4. Her grief over them is pointed: they love their simplicity. They have been offered the chance to grow and be formed, and they have preferred to remain open to every wind, shaped by nothing. Simplicity is a condition one can be rescued from — but not if one loves it.

The “scoffers” (*letsim*) are darker. The scoffer has moved past untested openness into active contempt. He does not merely refuse wisdom; he makes sport of it. He laughs at the reverent. He treats the fear of the LORD as quaint and antiquated. Proverbs will have a great deal more to say about the scoffer, and none of it is hopeful.

The “fools” (*kesilim*) — a different Hebrew word from the *evil* of verse 7 — are the dull, dense fools. Their trouble is not resistance so much as density. They do not merely avoid knowledge; they hate it. Their posture toward truth is aversion.

Three postures, each worse than the last. And Wisdom sees all three and asks: how long?

Her Offer (v. 23)

“If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you; I will make my words known to you.”

And now, astonishingly, grace.

Wisdom has just diagnosed the disease. The next word is an offer. “If you turn” — *tashuvu* — from *shuv*, the great biblical verb of repentance, of turning around, of reversing course. This is the same verb the prophets use when they call Israel back to the LORD. Wisdom is calling for repentance.

“I will pour out my spirit to you.” The language is arresting. This is the vocabulary of Joel 2 and of Pentecost. To pour out one’s spirit is to give oneself, to communicate one’s inmost being. Wisdom is not offering a transaction. She is offering herself.

“I will make my words known to you.” She will not hoard. She will not gatekeep. The door is open, and the invitation is extravagant.

This verse is the hinge of the whole speech. Everything before it is diagnosis. Everything after it is consequence. Between them stands this offer — generous, unmerited, free.

Her Warning (vv. 24–32)

“Because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded, because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when terror strikes you, when terror strikes you like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices. For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them.”

The hinge closes. Wisdom now speaks as one whose offer has been refused. Note the imagery: “stretched out my hand.” It is the gesture of one pleading — hand extended, open, offered. And

it has been met with indifference. The verbs pile up: she called and they refused; she stretched out her hand and no one heeded; they ignored her counsel and would have none of her reproof. Four verbs of rejection in two verses.

This is important. The judgment that follows is not capricious. It is not the wrath of a God who was never approachable. It is the settled consequence of a long refusal. The door stood open. The voice rang in the streets. The hand was extended. And the fool walked past.

What follows is hard, and we should resist the urge to soften it. Wisdom says she will laugh when calamity comes. She will mock when the storm arrives. This is not petty vindictiveness. It is the moral structure of the universe asserting itself. Reality is not indifferent to how a man lives. The storm that comes is not random; it is the harvest of what was planted. And Wisdom, who warned in the street and at the gate and was ignored, does not now arrive to undo the consequences of a life built in defiance of her.

There is a deep theological point here. A world in which folly carried no consequences would not be a more loving world — it would be a world in which nothing a man does ultimately matters. The fact that foolishness destroys is itself a mercy, because it means wisdom genuinely saves.

And when the fool is finally struck by the storm and turns to seek wisdom, he does not find her. Why? Verse 29 gives the answer: “because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD.” There it is again — the fear of the LORD, the thread that runs through the entire chapter. Verse 7 said it was the beginning of knowledge. Verse 29 says its refusal is the root of the ruin. The fool’s problem was never intellectual. It was postural. He would not bow. And the harvest of that refusal is this moment — seeking, and not finding.

“They shall eat the fruit of their way.” The metaphor is agricultural. A man plants, and in time he eats what he has planted. This is not arbitrary punishment; it is harvest. “The simple are killed by their turning away” — the word is *meshuvah*, literally their turning-back, their backsliding. The same root as the *shuv* of verse 23, but now running in the opposite direction. Wisdom called them to turn *to* her. They turned *away* instead. And the turning is lethal.

“The complacency of fools destroys them.” *Shalvah* — ease, untroubledness, the settled comfort of the man who is certain nothing will ever come for him. He is not agitated. He is not worried. He is perfectly at ease. And it is his ease that undoes him.

Her Promise (v. 33)

“*But whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster.*”

And the chapter ends with the other way.

“Whoever listens to me” — *shema* again. The same call that opened verse 8. Hear, my son. Now Wisdom herself says: hear me. “Will dwell secure” — will abide in safety, will be settled in a trustworthy place. “Will be at ease” — this is a different word than the complacency of the fool in verse 32. This is genuine rest, settled rest, the rest of the one who has built on what will hold.

“Without dread of disaster” — literally, without fear of evil. The one who has feared the LORD does not need to fear the storm. Fear rightly placed dispels fear wrongly placed.

The Shape of the Chapter

Stand back and look at what Solomon has done in this single chapter.

Verses 1–6 state the purpose of the book. Verse 7 delivers the motto: the fear of the LORD. Verses 8–9 introduce the first voice — the parents. Verses 10–19 introduce the second voice — the enticers. Verses 20–33 introduce the third voice — Wisdom herself.

Three voices have been heard. The father and mother, who teach. The sinners, who entice. And Wisdom, who cries in the street.

Every young man — every person — lives at the intersection of these three voices. The question of a life is which voice is obeyed.

And chapter 1 ends with a clean binary. Those who refuse Wisdom will eat the fruit of their refusal. Those who listen will dwell secure. There is no third way. There is no neutral ground. There is the storm, and there is the settled dwelling — and the difference between them is whether, when Wisdom cried in the street, a man stopped and listened.