

A Proverbs Driven Life

Timeless Wisdom for Your Words,
Work, Wealth, and Relationships

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P A R T O N E

Foundations

A Proverbs-Driven Life values wise living and wise speech as essential and inseparable.



Proverbs

For a Life of Wisdom

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for attaining wisdom.

Proverbs 1:1

*T*his is a book about wisdom, which means it's a book about life.

Far more importantly, this is a book about the wisdom God has given us in the book of Proverbs. By this wisdom, we can learn how to live in light of what is really true about ourselves, one another, and this wonderful yet deeply flawed world. Ultimately, therefore, this is a book about life lived for God in the light of divine truth. It's about life as God intends for us to live it.

A Proverbs-Driven Life centers on one particular place in Scripture, the book of Proverbs, because there we find wisdom in an unusually compact form. From there we can also branch out to other of the Bible's Wisdom Books, like Psalms and

Ecclesiastes, and to many additional places in both the Old and New Testaments. To begin with nuggets of wisdom from Proverbs and then examine how other sections of Scripture address the same topics can help us see truth more clearly and deeply, which is vital to gaining wisdom and thereby living a Proverbs-driven life.

So, what is wisdom? One way to put it is that wisdom is an ability to make good decisions based on knowledge, and then act on those decisions in a way that's effective and makes a difference. Let me illustrate.

In November, 2004, my wife and I, embarking on the adventure of a lifetime, boarded a plane for the People's Republic of China. Having struggled for many years to conceive a child, we had prayerfully decided to pursue international adoption. The process was arduous and the wait excruciating, but one day in October, 2004, our adoption agency finally called. A little girl was waiting for us in China. We had less than a month to go get her.

The days leading up to the flight were something of a blur, but now, on that long passage over the Pacific, we had time both to reflect and to anticipate. Although a little anxious about our upcoming transition into parenthood, my wife and I were convinced we were fully prepared. After all, most couples only have about nine months to ready themselves. Our adoption process had taken a full fourteen months, and we had used the time well. We had read and studied a great deal of material, talked about it together, and discussed parenthood with friends. We had made out our checklists and mapped out our strategies. Yes, we were ready for anything.

The plane finally landed and we made our way to the hotel. And a few days later, on a cold afternoon in an unheated government building in the city of Wuhan, a warm bundle was placed in our arms, a beautiful 14-month-old girl. This was one of the greatest days of our lives. We were finally parents! After a whirlwind trip to the local mall for baby clothes, we

found ourselves back at our hotel room with our new daughter. Putting down our parcels and taking off our coats, we sat down to admire her and gaze lovingly at one another, amazed and thankful to God for all he had done for us.

That's when chaos began to take hold. Our new daughter, so cute and charming, started to cry.

At first, we responded fairly well. We had a strategy for crying. Got it right out of a book. So we applied the strategy—some cuddles, some rocking, a pacifier, that sort of thing. No effect. Then we applied it again. (After all, as beginners, we may not have done it quite right the first time.) Again, no effect. None at all.

Variations on the strategy didn't work, either. We were improvising freely now, still without results. The minutes dragged on, slowing to a crawl as our baby's pitiable, heart-wrenching cries filled every corner of the room. Glancing at one another, my wife and I acknowledged the trace of panic we saw in each other's eyes. For here we were in a foreign country, far away from friends and family, with an utterly inconsolable baby girl who was now our sole responsibility. As the minutes stretched into hours, and the awful wailing settled down into recurrent bouts of miserable sobbing, all of our preparation and accumulated knowledge about parenthood began to seem completely worthless. Apparently, raising children was going to require more than knowledge.

We had begun to understand. For what we lacked in those first few days in China was not knowledge. What we lacked was wisdom.

Wisdom is More than Knowledge

Information is about facts, and knowledge is about fitting related facts together. But wisdom is about using knowledge well. What my wife and I suffered from in that hotel room is similar to what now afflicts most of the culture, and even the

church. We have vast storehouses of information and knowledge, but very little wisdom.

Never before in human history has there been so much knowledge so widely spread among the population. For anyone with an internet connection, access to additional information is essentially limitless. In the church, Christians have never had greater access to information about the Bible and sound theology. Yet at the same time, in both the church and the world, wisdom is in decline. We take great pride in our accumulated knowledge, and our hard drives are packed with data. But in some of the most important areas of life, such as raising children, maintaining healthy relationships, and handling finances responsibly, a great many of us just don't know what to do.

When it comes to the crucial areas covered by this book—words, work, wealth, and relationships—people make a lot of short-sighted, self-centered decisions. It's true that much of the current so-called knowledge pertaining to these areas is actually very bad advice, but while having the right knowledge is vital, it is not sufficient in itself. Most of the knowledge about babies that my wife and I learned before going to China was perfectly accurate. Later, when we had grown in wisdom, it served us well. But accurate knowledge alone does not translate into better decisions or wiser living.

Another factor that can make the pursuit and practice of wisdom challenging is the sheer pace of daily life. The options available to us in the modern world can be so diverse and so distracting that we forget to pay close attention to the beauty, simplicity, and power of the Word of God and what it teaches us. So much of modern life seems to be about adding—adding possessions, adding relationships, adding efficiency, adding income, adding prestige, adding power, adding health, adding leisure. But at the heart of godly wisdom is an ability not to become distracted from those things that are most important in life, and never to set them aside, even as we adapt to

certain legitimate changes in society. For amidst all the noise, the data, the trends, the traffic, the hurry, the turmoil, and the bad advice, the Bible remains our sole reliable source of unchanging, timeless wisdom.

God's wisdom flows through the entire Bible. But as we focus in this book on the unique presentation of wisdom found in Proverbs, we will find three strands of teaching that weave together. We will learn that wisdom is supremely valuable. We will learn that our only real choices in life are between wisdom and folly. And best of all, we will learn wisdom itself.

How to Read Proverbs Rightly

In a complicated world, so many aspects of life can be confusing or challenging that we may grasp at anything that looks like a simple explanation or solution to a problem. The Bible does, of course, bring stunning clarity to many of the most perplexing questions of life. But this does not mean we can read the Bible—or in this case, the book of Proverbs—casually. Proverbs is not a collection of simplistic formulas for guaranteed success. Nor is it intended as a means to back-test and explain difficulties or moral failures. Rather, Proverbs offers us future-oriented wisdom and guidance so we can make wise decisions and live in ways that please and exalt God. It takes both knowledge and, yes, a measure of wisdom to read Proverbs rightly.

So before we get started, we need some insight into how the book of Proverbs communicates truth. That is, we need wisdom about this particular *form* of wisdom, so that we can apply it rightly. Perhaps the most common error when studying a proverb is to read into it more than it is actually saying. Here are four ways to avoid doing that.

Use Basic Logic

As a first step, a proverb should be read according to the plain meaning of the words, limiting our focus to the central

point. Sometimes this is simply a matter of logic. For example, when Proverbs 13:11 says, “Dishonest money dwindles away,” this does not allow us to conclude that *if* money dwindles away it *must* have been gained dishonestly. That’s not what the verse says. Indeed, dishonest gain is far from the only possible cause of dwindling finances, a point that is made several times in Scripture.

Don’t Read Any Proverb in Isolation

This leads us to a second lesson in interpreting Proverbs. We must not look at individual proverbs as if they stand apart from the rest of the Bible. Staying with Proverbs 13:11 as our example, let’s recall the Bible’s teaching that all material riches are temporary and unreliable, not just those gained dishonestly (see Psalm 49:5–9, 16–17). Scripture interprets itself, and no single verse or passage is self-contained. Proverbs 13:11 must therefore mean that dishonest money is merely temporary and unreliable in a more pronounced way than money gained honestly, because God’s blessing and protection are to some degree withheld in the case of dishonesty. Also, the Bible speaks of evil people openly enjoying material prosperity as a result of ill-gotten gains, while experience confirms that there have been wealthy criminals throughout history. Therefore, Proverbs 13:11 cannot mean that every dollar earned dishonestly will inevitably slip through a criminal’s fingers in short order.

Don’t Put God on Your Timetable

Many proverbs speak of certain actions drawing certain responses from God: rewards for obedience and punishment or discipline for disobedience. When it comes to such matters, one specific way we can avoid reading Proverbs in isolation from the rest of Scripture is to recall this glimpse into the mind of God given us by the apostle Peter: “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like

a day” (2 Peter 3:8). While God’s timing is always perfect, it is never predictable, for he is outside of time, he created time, and he is not in the least bound by our conceptions of time. Thus, punishment or discipline does not always immediately follow sin, and reward does not always immediately follow obedience. All the promises in the Bible are reliable and true, and not one will be left unfulfilled. But some are fulfilled sooner, some later, and some will only be fulfilled in the age to come.

Bruce Waltke helps us understand delayed rewards when he writes, “God develops the character of his saints by calling them to suffer for the sake of righteousness while living in the hope of eternal life.”¹ No greater example of this is possible than the life of our Savior. Jesus left the most perfect existence possible and lived for three decades in humiliation, suffering, and perfect obedience, culminating in his death under the crushing horrors of the cross. Only following his resurrection, some forty-three days after Calvary, did he experience his reward: Being exalted to God’s right hand and being given the name that is above every name (Philippians 2:5–11).

Make God the Goal of Your Obedience

At all times, we need to keep in mind the ultimate reason we read Scripture: To know and obey God. Following the way of the wise as set forth in the book of Proverbs *will* help you to avoid paths that lead to ruin. It *will* set you on paths that lead to long life and prosperity. Proverbs *does* offer an infallible guarantee that a Proverbs-driven life will result in spiritual and practical blessings. But it is vitally important to remember that the goal of Proverbs is not finding earthly prosperity or even wisdom itself. The goal of Proverbs is to grow ever closer to the God who is Wisdom. Knowing God is the proper definition of the good life, and the highest goal of the Proverbs-driven life.

Jesus and the Book of Proverbs

The book of Proverbs is one of the best known Old Testament books, both inside and outside Christianity, and a classic of literature in its own right. Christians who look to the crucified and risen Christ as the heart of our faith can be so centered on the twenty-seven New Testament books directly involving Jesus that we may come to see Proverbs and other Old Testament books as somewhat removed from the life and legacy of our Savior.

But there are actually very close connections between Jesus and Proverbs. After all, Jesus himself declared that the entire Old Testament was written about him (Luke 24:44). We should come to every book of the Old Testament seeking to uncover the many connections to Christ. Such connections are certainly present in Proverbs. Here are four of them.

Jesus Lived Wisdom

During his time on earth, Jesus personified the Proverbs-driven life. His life here demonstrated continual wisdom. His every act was wise. Just as he was perfect in every other way, Jesus perfectly lived the wisdom of Proverbs.

The Gospels include only one account from our Lord's youth. Luke records that when Jesus was twelve years old, he entered the Temple courts in Jerusalem and discussed theology with the teachers of the law (Luke 2:41–50), some of the most educated men of the day. During this interchange, young Jesus caused everyone to be “amazed at his understanding.” Thus, the first time in Scripture that we see Jesus interacting with others, we come away impressed with his wisdom and understanding.

Indeed, Luke brackets this account with the only two descriptions we have of Jesus' growth from infancy into young manhood, and wisdom is central each time. The first instance refers to Jesus after his presentation at the Temple, when he was perhaps two or three years old. Luke tells us that follow-

ing this presentation, Jesus “was filled with wisdom” (2:40). And subsequent to Jesus’ conversations in the Temple at age twelve, Luke tells us he “grew in wisdom” (2:52)—even *after* he had amazed the teachers of the law.

As the Gospels go on to richly demonstrate, the entirety of Jesus’ adult life was marked by his display and use of wisdom. This is perhaps most powerfully seen in his famous parables, which, like the biblical Proverbs, are a particularly concentrated form of wisdom instruction. Jesus was a man who lived wisdom.

Jesus is Wisdom

Jesus not only displayed wisdom. In a sense, Jesus *is* wisdom. This is a second way in which he is closely tied to the pure expressions of wisdom found in Proverbs.

Look at it this way. The words of Proverbs bear wisdom from God. This wisdom is inherent in who God is, for just as God is the perfection of all holiness and all power, he is also the perfection of all wisdom. God is the only source of true wisdom.

So Proverbs is a perfect expression of God’s wisdom, in written form, sent as a gift to help us. Jesus is also a perfect expression of God’s wisdom, in divine/human form, sent as a gift to help us. Just as Proverbs is more than words on a page, but is the eternal Word of God, Jesus was more than a man. He is the “Word of Life” who “was from the beginning” (1 John 1:1).

Like Proverbs, Jesus embodies and displays the wisdom which is inherent in the being of God, for Jesus is “wisdom from God,” (1 Corinthians 1:30) and the one in whom are “hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). To see the perfect representation of the wisdom of God in flesh, look to Jesus. “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Hebrews 1:3). To see the perfect representation of the wisdom of God in print, you can do no better than Proverbs.

This is not to say that Proverbs is better or more true than other parts of the Bible. Without a doubt, all Scripture is God-breathed wisdom (2 Timothy 3:16). It is simply to point out that the compact, concentrated manner in which God's wisdom is expressed and presented to us in Proverbs is unique. Much like Jesus, Proverbs embodies God's wisdom in a way that nothing else does or can.

Jesus is the Way of Wisdom

Because Jesus is wisdom, God calls us to choose his way rather than the foolish way of the world. Just as the book of Proverbs contrasts the path of wisdom and the path of folly, the New Testament presents us with a similar choice, contrasting "God's secret wisdom" revealed in Jesus Christ with the world's foolishness (1 Corinthians 2:6–8). Old Testament scholars Raymond Dillard and Tremper Longman describe this particular connection between Proverbs and Jesus:

[A]s Christians read the book of Proverbs in the light of the continued revelation of the New Testament, they are confronted with the same question as the ancient Israelites, but with a different nuance. Will we dine with Wisdom or with Folly? The Wisdom who beckons us is none other than Jesus Christ, while the folly that attempts to seduce is any created thing that we put in place of the Creator (Romans 1:22–23).²

The wise man chooses Jesus, and the fool chooses the folly of this world. Jesus is the way of wisdom.

Jesus Supplies Wisdom

Finally, just like the book of Proverbs, Jesus promises to give wisdom to those who hear and receive his words. Jesus promised this to his original disciples as he told them about the resistance they would face in the future, "For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict" (Luke 21:15). This promise was initially fulfilled in both Stephen (Acts 6:3, 10) and Paul

(2 Peter 3:15), but it continues to be a gift promised to the entire church throughout the ages (Ephesians 1:17). Because of Jesus' work on our behalf, wisdom is a gift available for the asking, as James declares: "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). Jesus is the giver of wisdom and one of the ways Jesus gives his people wisdom is by providing us with the book of Proverbs.

So as we study the book of Proverbs we must always keep in mind that this book, like the rest of Scripture, reveals the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the perfectly wise man; he is wisdom, the way of wisdom, and the giver of wisdom. Jesus is a unique expression of wisdom; he is the one who is "greater than Solomon" (Matthew 12:42), author of much of the book of Proverbs.

It is this reality, recognizing that Proverbs is a book about Jesus, that serves as the impetus for living a Proverbs-driven life. As we live wisely according to Proverbs, we are living like Christ. We are being conformed into his image and we are reflecting his glory to the world around us. We can live a Proverbs-driven life because Jesus first lived that life for us. As the one who *lived* wisdom, the one who *is* wisdom, the one who is the *way* of wisdom, and the one who *supplies* wisdom, Jesus is present in Proverbs in a most profound way.

The Privilege of a Proverbs-Driven Life

The book of Proverbs offers you an extraordinary opportunity. For those willing to engage with it, it offers a life lived in the good of God's inspired wisdom. Proverbs offers you the privilege of living God's Word in every aspect of daily life. As we will see in this book, Proverbs provides us with wisdom regarding finances, childrearing, marriage, employment, friendship, and speech.

If your speech is godly, and your economic life is biblically balanced and in its place, and your human relationships are

sound and healthy according to Scripture, you've just about got everything covered. This book seeks to organize some of the wisdom of Proverbs under those major topical themes. The goal is to help you more readily access the vast wisdom of the book of Proverbs and thereby experience the privilege of living a Proverbs-driven life to the glory of God.

But this will require more than memorizing a few passages. Proverbs is not a reference book to pull off the shelf when you are stumped by life's difficulties. It is not a set of pat answers to cookie-cutter challenges. Instead, it guides and empowers us to discover answers for ourselves by virtue of having gained wisdom through diligent application. In Proverbs, God acts towards us like the teacher who won't give his student the solution to a math problem because he knows that the student learns more by solving it for himself. Biblical scholar Graeme Goldsworthy describes the challenge of Proverbs:

The individual proverbs are not detailed expressions of the law of Sinai handed down from God, but human reflections on individual experiences in the light of God's truth. Thus, they show us that being human as God intends means learning to think and act in a godly way. It means that, in revelation, God gives the framework for godly thinking but he will not do our thinking for us. We are responsible for the decisions we make as we seek to be wise (to think in a godly way) and to avoid being foolish (to think in a godless way).³

The book of Proverbs will not allow you to be a passive learner, merely soaking up information. It requires you to put God's wisdom to work in your life. Bob Beasley notes that someone once described Proverbs, quite appropriately, as "the Ten Commandments in shoe leather,"⁴ for in that book we begin to see how wisdom can be walked out in real life.

Are you ready to actively live the wisdom of God's Word? Are you ready to put into practice the power of Proverbs? If so, you have taken the first step toward living a Proverbs-driven life!