

The Beginning of Wisdom

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Date: 18 October 2026

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[0:00] Well, as you can see today, we are starting a new series in Proverbs. Proverbs is buried in a corner of the Bible that's generally referred to as wisdom literature.

! Some of the Psalms fall under this category, but with the exception of those Psalms, the wisdom literature is probably the least preached part of the Bible. Job, you wouldn't know it if you've been coming along here, I suppose.

It's Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs. And I'm going to start our series by giving you a few of my guesses as to why it is that this might not be preached upon or opened up in the privacy of our own homes quite as much as other parts of the Bible.

And these guesses as to why that is will help set us up as we seek to spend three weeks across the next three months in this book. And the first is the feeling you might already be having.

You're bored. Wisdom literature. It's a slightly off-putting phrase. Some of you are bored just from hearing those two words, let alone hearing them smashed together.

[1:11] I say that we're spending time in wisdom literature and you, in unison, say, oh, great, as it happens, every time you're preaching for the next three months, Ash, I'll be picking up relatives from the airport, feeling a bit under the weather or gnawing off my own arm, but I'll see you at the carol service.

It's esoteric, boring, tweeby, one for the Bible geeks who don't get out enough. And while I love to spend time defending those of us who fit so neatly into those categories, it's actually kind of the opposite.

Wisdom literature is where all of us live all of the time. I suspect there will be very few new words learned over these weeks in Proverbs because all of us will have the language and depth of thought about all of these things that we'll look at just by virtue of being human.

Were we looking at a New Testament epistle? We might be learning words like propitiation or imputation, or if we were in Old Testament history, we'd be figuring out exactly what a tabernacle is. But the things we'll be looking at in this brief series in Proverbs, in the rest of the book as you read it, well, they're amongst the most accessible topics you'll ever hear from a pulpit.

[2:26] We'll consider things like money, sex, speech, ambition, work. You'll have spent just as much time as I have thinking about these things.

Now, those other things that I've mentioned, things like propitiation, justification, these are vital, which is why we teach them. It is absolutely necessary that we teach everyone who comes here to worship that humanity has rebelled against God, that sin, the wrong things we do in life, demands punishment from a just God, and that is why death reigns in the world.

And furthermore, that Jesus Christ took that sin from us. He lived a perfect life, taking death upon himself so that we could be forgiven and live forever with God.

These are the glorious, beautiful, essential, structural pillars in the cathedral of the Christian faith. And yet between those pillars is a vast room in which we live and worship.

Derek Kidner says this in his introduction to a commentary on Proverbs. He says there are details of character small enough to escape the mesh of the law and the broadsides of the prophets and yet decisive and personal dealings.

[3:47] What he's saying there is if you've got these layers of mesh, you know, like chicken wire, one's the law, one's doctrinal epistles, perhaps one's prophets, then you'll hear things like don't commit adultery from the law.

You'll hear don't abuse your power for sex from the prophets. You'll hear that God is faithful and consistent. You can derive all sorts of helpful things from all of those things.

But if you pour life over those layers of mesh, there are still some holes. Quite a lot of life will drip through. I can learn from the rest of the Bible to keep sex within marriage, but not who to marry. I can learn from the rest of the Bible to tithe and not to take advantage of the poor, but what about what to do with the rest of my money? I can learn not to lie, swear, curse, insult, boast, or gossip. But believe it or not, there's a good chunk of my speech that isn't those things, how should I use it? How should I speak? And wisdom literature addresses these things.

[4:53] However, that leads us to the next reason that it can be frustrating. We can think of it as quite baffling. Wisdom literature tends not to say, thou shalt not, very often.

It can be quite baffling if you're looking for direct instructions. If you've heard me preach much before, you may well have heard me quote my mentor who used to say to me quite regularly that it's better as a pastor for people to make their own bad decisions than for me to get them to make my good ones.

Now, the reason behind that principle is what happens to the soul of each person in that exchange. I learn to control people and forget that I'm but a beast created by God.

I'm back in Eden trying to be God. And the people I seek to control don't learn wisdom either. Just learn to do my bidding. But man, sometimes I would go to him.

I would go to Mark and beg him, please just tell me what to do. I'm in a really difficult situation. I need your wisdom. But that's all he'd give me. He'd just lay out things that would help me think wisely.

[6:00] He's a very irritating man. Welcome to wisdom literature. One proverb that I like to go to by way of example, which some of you may have heard of before, is found in Proverbs chapter 26, verses 4 and 5.

It goes like this. Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, or else he'll become wise in his own eyes.

So don't answer a fool according to his folly, or you'll be sucked down into it. Also answer a fool according to his folly, or he'll be wise in his own eyes. Well, so when someone's spouting rubbish, do I engage with them or not?

Well, it gives contradictory advice, doesn't it? Well, only if you're reading this book, desperately trying to get someone else to answer the question for you and say, what should I do right now? What the proverb does is equip you to think through the categories of what might matter in that situation.

You must weigh up whether this conversation is more likely to bring you down or raise a fool up and act accordingly. So when someone is saying something deeply foolish, should I engage with them or not?

[7:18] There's an old XKCD comic that I quite enjoy that shows a man refusing to come to bed and his wife saying, come on, what's the problem?

What's the problem? And he says, this is important. She goes, what is it? And he says, someone's wrong on the internet. And he has to reply. There's a slightly comic example, as it were, but almost certainly relevant.

But how many of us have had to decide when it comes to a situation with a relative or a close friend, actually this situation is not worth the shouting match?

They've got other people saying what needs to be said. I want to preserve the relationship so that I can stand by them and walk with them in life. Or on the flip side, how many of us had to decide with the same kinds of people, this is going to be a really awkward, a terribly unpleasant conversation, but they need to hear it.

I'm best placed to tell them. So I think I must have this awful, awkward conversation. Boy, do we need wisdom in life. And then finally, the third reason we might kind of keep this book and wisdom literature at arm's length is we fear it might be a bit banal, that is to say, dull, not particularly useful.

[8:46] We think of proverbs as these just kind of phrases that don't really mean a huge amount. Tomorrow is another day. Oh, is it? Thank you. I'm not upset anymore. A lot of the proverbs in this book are packaged.

They're so neat and efficiently worded in a way that makes you think maybe you didn't even need it to be in the Bible to get them. You could have waited patiently for the office Christmas party, just pulled a cracker and got one or got fortune cookies at your next takeout.

But don't be fooled by the simplicity of these proverbs. They're simple because this book makes wisdom available for anyone who will listen.

It's a catch-all. It's there for everyone. My school had a physical rule book which we were all given. It's somewhere at my parents' house. And they understood the need for this level of flexibility that wisdom literature offers.

There are lots of sensible rules like don't bring a blade into school. And that's a hard and fast one. But rule 1.1, I still remember because for some reason or other I had to write it out several times.

[9 : 58] all boys must at all times behave sensibly and well. Or as I remember it, all, all, all, all, all boys, but it's quicker to write it out that way. Now, there hadn't been a particular rule about using the L pipe and copper shavings to make a green-flamed flamethrower in chemistry.

But they had me with rule 1.1, all boys at all times must behave sensibly and well. They understood the need for broad wisdom. And just that school rule needed something flexible enough to be wise in all situations and comprehensible enough even for boys like me to become prudent or wise.

So too do we have this book of Proverbs. And so we're going to spend the rest of our time looking a bit more closely at these verses that we had read out for giving prudence to those who are simple. That's how the book introduces itself in verse 4. A book for the simple, which means at the very least it's for all of us. Well, we've set ourselves up for the series. Let's just look at these last two points that I've got at the bottom of the screen there in our passage.

The self-help book to beat all others and the wisdom that transforms all others. Let me just read it again. It's a short passage. The Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel, for gaining wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for receiving instruction in prudent behavior, doing what is right and just and fair, for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young.

[11 : 35] Let the wise listen and add to their learning and let the discerning get guidance for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction. I wonder what you're like at getting advice, what your reaction tends to be.

I know you like giving it. We all like giving it. But how do you react when someone gives it to you? Perhaps unprompted. Someone once said that the trouble with good advice is it usually interferes with our plans that we have.

And the real problem as we enter this book isn't that it's boring, baffling or banal. It's none of those things.

Our real problem is that proverbs is a book of advice and that's just not our favorite thing to get. So let's think of this as a kind of book of advice.

[12 : 36] Perhaps in some way a bit like those self-help books that shift their way to the front of Waterstones as Christmas draws nearer. Think about how you would approach a book like that.

You'd think, well, who's written this for a start? Verse 1, the Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel. It's worth paying attention to at first, isn't it?

When a king writes a book, people will buy it. I mean, it wasn't all that long ago that people went in droves to buy the book of an absconded prince. And this isn't just any king.

This isn't just any royalty. This is King Solomon. Solomon, whom God offered anything that he chose. And Solomon said, Lord, give me wisdom.

And God gave him much else besides. People came from every nation to hear this man speak, to hear his wisdom dispensed. And so if he can't tell us to live, then who can?

[13 : 35] Well, what does it contain? What kinds of things will I find inside? Well, verses two and three gain wisdom, instruction, understanding words of insight, receive instruction in prudent behavior and do what is right and just and fair.

This is about living well. This is rule 1.1. It will help its readers to be wiser, smarter, better people. They should put this verse at the blurb on the back.

And then who's it for? Well, it's for giving prudence to those who are simple. And in particular, knowledge for discretion, knowledge and discretion for the young.

We'll read on and see some other people it's for in a moment. But the simple can get prudence. Even the young who surely never listen to anything their elders have to say will find knowledge within and discretion.

Just imagine what kind of a world we'd live in if everyone had that. Or more to the point, imagine if you and I had it. The manual to beat all manuals. The self-help book to beat all self-help books. [14:42] But then, verses 5 and 6, we see that this is no normal self-help book. Let the wise listen and add to their learning.

Let the discerning get guidance for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise. This isn't just speaking to mugs like me, scanning bookshop shelves for something to help us tie our shoelaces up.

No, this is speaking to people who are already supposed to be wise and clever. Even gurus have to learn and this is where they come. When it comes to wisdom, I'm sure many of you have me at a disadvantage, but verse 5 says that's no reason for anyone to stop listening.

And verse 6 says that you're going to have to work and learn to listen how to read this book. It's got riddles in it. So proverbs knew that we'd feel a bit baffled.

So let me just say this very briefly. A proverb is normally true. It tells you how life generally goes, but not how it goes every single time.

[15:55] It shows patterns rather than promises of this is how everything is. But a proverb is ultimately true. Some of those won't necessarily look immediately true from where you're standing if you hear that the wicked won't prosper and you look around and you think, well, the wicked seem to be prospering.

The lazy will seem to be getting away with it, flying by the seat of their trousers. But wait and see. And a proverb is also partial.

One proverb rarely says everything. But it offers advice in a particular moment. We've seen that with answering the fool according to his folly and not answering him.

But here's the other thing as we come to this book that's hard to ignore. Even the king needed more than just the proverbs that he'd written down.

1 Kings 11 tells us that as Solomon grew old, his wives, plural, turned his heart after other gods, also plural.

[17:05] The man who wrote, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, stopped fearing the Lord. The man who wrote chapter after chapter warning his son about adultery had 700 wives and 300 concubines.

He wrote the advice, but he stopped taking it. Which tells us something very important as we come to this book. Advice, even the very best advice, is not enough.

Just knowing a proverb can't make anyone wise. The fool, more often than not, knows exactly what a proverb says and does the opposite anyway. So keep Solomon in mind because the real heart of this introduction is in verse 7.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. The beginning of wisdom. But fools will despise wisdom and instruction.

In other words, you'd have to be a fool to ignore this. And yet that's precisely what we do, isn't it? The fear of the Lord is the beginning.

[18:17] It's an odd and hard phrase again, isn't it? The fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord actually runs right through this book and it's a good thing. It's a great thing. It's a deep respect, honour, awe, wonder, the kind that comes from knowing who God is.

Chapter 15 puts it like this. Wisdom's instruction is to fear the Lord and humility comes before honour. Humility comes before honour.

You see, we began our service with prayerful declarations of who God is. He's creator, he's Lord, he's king. will finish by being invited to his table as his friend whom he died for.

And if that doesn't fill you with a joyful, tear-filled awe, I don't know what will, that's what we mean when we talk about the fear of the Lord. An overwhelming understanding of who he is and what he's done.

There are few better places to go to capture the meaning of the fear of the Lord than the moment in the children's book *The Silver Chair*, part of the Narnia series when the girl, Jill, first meets Aslan.

[19:33] So indulge me while I read you a portion of that. Jill comes across the lion as she's seeking somewhere to drink.

Are you not thirsty? said the lion. I'm dying of thirst, said Jill. Then drink, said the lion. May I, could I, do you mind going away while I do?

said Jill. The lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realised that she might well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience.

The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic. Will you promise not to do anything to me if I come? said Jill.

I make no promise, said the lion. Jill was so thirsty now that without noticing it she'd come a step nearer. Do you eat girls? she said.

[20 : 37] I've swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms, said the lion. It didn't say this as if it were boasting nor as if it were sorry nor as if it were angry, it just said it.

I dare not come and drink, said Jill. Then you will die of thirst, said the lion. Oh dear, she said, coming another step nearer. I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.

There is no other stream, said the lion. forgive me, my Meryl Streep impression needs a bit of work. But there is no better place to go for wisdom.

There's no other place to go for wisdom. These proverbs are given to us from God through Solomon. And our God is powerful.

He is a judge. He is awesome. He has swallowed cities and realms. And he is good. And he is worthy to be feared.

[21 : 39] And that fear will change everything. Chapter 8 says, to fear the Lord is to hate evil. Once you begin to see something of the majesty and the holiness, just the goodness of God, you start to share in his priorities.

Lewis later wrote that being a practicing Christian meant that every single act and feeling, every experience, whether pleasant or unpleasant, must be referred to God.

How it relates to him, every detail, which is why this book will cover every corner of life, money, sex, speech, ambition, work. God's interested in all of it and wants us to do wisely in all of those things. But take your eye off him and see what happens. Solomon saw what happens. We all do it day in, day out. We get preoccupied.

Sometimes it's something perfectly harmless or something that isn't perhaps. And we forget. We forget who God is. We forget how holy he is. We forget that he is providentially running everything, that nothing escapes his will.

[22 : 50] We forget how much he loves us and how much he gave for us. And so here's the answer to that third objection, banal, it's a bit dull. Well, cracker wisdom, Christmas cracker wisdom starts and ends with us, early to bed, early to rise.

Proverbs always will start with God. It isn't finally about what you know or even what you do. It's about who you know.

It's about being able to come to God and ask not only for advice, Solomon had the advice and he dispensed it, but for help.

This is a book of advice that tells you, come to God for help. Fear the Lord. Fear the Lord. That's the beginning of all wisdom. And that's where, obviously, Solomon leaves us.

It couldn't, the advice itself couldn't keep its own author straight. But this comes from God and he tells us we need help. And we need help from someone even greater than Solomon.

[23 : 56] Handily, if you're looking for someone greater than Solomon, Jesus did once declare about himself, someone greater than Solomon is here. Jesus doesn't just give wisdom.

He doesn't just say, oh, this is what you should do and then watch us not do it. Paul says that Jesus is the wisdom of God, that he's become for us wisdom from God, that is our righteousness, our holiness, and our redemption.

Solomon gives us wisdom that leads directly to Jesus and Jesus gives himself and that leads to life. He did for us what we could never do for ourselves.

We were truly helpless. We didn't need self-help. We needed help from God. There's one proverb that sums all of this up.

Chapter 16, verse 6. Through love and faithfulness, sin is atoned for. Through the fear of the Lord, evil is avoided. Isn't that the Christian life?

[25 : 03] Our folly and our sin are dealt with at the cross, atoned for, covered for. We are washed. And then we're overwhelmed all over again by his love and his goodness.

That's where the fear of the Lord comes from. And out of that, we set ourselves to avoid evil until we don't, whereupon we come back again and again to the cross.

Do you see, God doesn't say, be perfect and I'll let you in. He doesn't give us the book of Proverbs and say, these are the rules and you're out if you break them. No, through love and faithfulness, Proverbs says, sin is atoned for.

So though we may be and feel small creatures in a vast creation, we are far from irrelevant in God's eyes. He loves us. God loves us.

But it doesn't create room for arrogance either because God has an awful lot to forgive, doesn't he? God calls us to be forgiven friends, not smug, morally upright rebels.

[26 : 11] We don't live wisely to earn God's love. No, we try to live wisely in response to it. Again, we come back again and again to the cross of Jesus.

That's what this table is set for. We keep coming back through love and faithfulness, sin is atoned for and here it is in bread and wine. Later in Proverbs, wisdom will set a table of her own and say, let all who are simple come to my house.

Come, eat my food and drink the wine I've mixed. Leave your simple ways and you will live. Well, this afternoon we'll hear that invitation in the voice of Jesus.

It isn't for the ones who've got it all sussed, it's for the simple who fear. In a moment, Jonathan will come forward and will lead us in discernment of whether each of us should take the bread and wine.

But for absolutely everyone, he will say, take in Jesus. There is no other stream. There's no other source of life. He offers the water of eternal life.

[27 : 20] So take what Jesus offers. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and it begins here. It begins right here. Don't be too proud to receive the King's advice.

Feast on Christ's wisdom and live well. Feast on Christ and live forever. Let's pray.

Let's pray.