



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

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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?

- I. 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.

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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.

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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.

- I. 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

