

(( ( PREACHING *the* WORD )) )

# PROVERBS

**WISDOM**  
*that* **WORKS**



**RAYMOND C. ORTLUND JR.**

R. Kent Hughes  
*Series Editor*

*Proverbs*

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# A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases, and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one’s sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one’s hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos*—in terms of preaching, God’s Word. This means that as we stand before God’s people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God’s Word, but God’s actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God’s smile in preaching is *ethos*—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never perfectly embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to

the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s *ethos* backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos*—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I don’t, but he does.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you preach the Word may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

*R. Kent Hughes*

# Preface

“Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice” (Proverbs 1:20). The Wisdom of God does not stand aloof, as if she were too good for us. She graciously moves toward us, into our real world where we live and struggle day by day. She offers us her very best, if we will only listen. With the overwhelming flood of information and opinion in our times, much of it a mixture of spin, sound bites, and trivialities, it is a relief to turn back to the Bible. It is a relief to slow down and pay close attention to deep insights that have stood the test of time.

As we come to the book of Proverbs, God does not intend to crush us with layer upon layer of demand. He intends to *help* us. The book of Proverbs is practical help from God for weak people like us stumbling through daily life. It is his counsel for the perplexed, his strength for the defeated, his warning to the proud, his mercy for the broken. The book of Proverbs is the gospel—good news for the inept through the wisdom of Another. We have every reason to receive it with a whole heart.

Thank you for picking up this book. May God use it to bless you as you study the wisdom of his ancient sages. The book of Proverbs is one of the “many ways” God has spoken to us (Hebrews 1:1). It leads us to Christ. If you look for him here, you will find him.

I am happy to acknowledge a special debt of gratitude to the commentaries of Bruce Waltke, John Kitchen, and Derek Kidner. In addition, I was helped by the preaching of Tim Keller on Proverbs. The influence of these outstanding scholars and pastors is pervasive throughout this book.

I thank Dr. Kent Hughes for the privilege of contributing this Proverbs volume to his Preaching the Word series. I thank the wonderful people of Immanuel Church, Nashville, for sharing in my eagerness to grow in the wisdom of Christ.

It gratifies me deeply to dedicate this book to Dr. Waltke. From 1971 to 1975 he was my esteemed Old Testament professor in seminary. His professional training and personal influence marked me for life. I feel a debt of love great beyond any possibility of repayment.

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# 1

## Why the Book of Proverbs Matters

*“Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!”*

PROVERBS 9:4, 16



EVERYONE IS ON A PATH. Everyone is going somewhere. When we feel stuck, even when we feel trapped, the truth is, we are still in motion. Life is a journey, and the end of it all is not just a place but also a condition. We are *becoming* the end of our journey, wise or foolish, and every moment takes us closer there.

God cares about that. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). The Bible is the voice of God inviting us into his eternal life. During the Old Testament era God standardized his speaking to us in three ways. The priests taught his law, the prophets declared his word, and the sages or wise men gave his counsel (Jeremiah 18:18). Both the commands of the Law and the thunderings of the prophets spread out before us the gigantic truths of God, the metanarrative that makes sense of everything. But we need more. We live day by day in a world where “there are details of character small enough to escape the mesh of the law and the broadsides of the prophets, and yet decisive in personal dealings.”<sup>1</sup> So God gave us more than the Law and the prophets. He also gave us wise counsel.

For example, Proverbs 27:14 in the NLT says, “A loud and cheerful greeting early in the morning will be taken as a curse!” We don’t find that in the Ten Commandments or in Isaiah or Jeremiah. But a well-intentioned but

ill-timed greeting can backfire, and that's worth knowing! God thinks so. He cares about our understanding of the massive truths of our existence. But he also cares about the nuances that make a difference in our relationships and experiences every day. Even if we do seek the holiness of the Law, and we do, even if we are inspired by the visions of the prophets, and we are, we can still make a mess of our lives, our families, our churches, our workplaces, our communities if we are unwise. We need God's help moment by moment, down at the level where there are no hard and fast rules to go by. What kind of woman or man should I marry? Which career path should I take? How can I endure this suffering I can't escape? How should I spend my money? Through the book of Proverbs, God coaches us in the *wisdom* we need throughout the long and complicated path of our everyday lives.

It's the practicality of the book of Proverbs that some people underestimate. This book is indeed practical, but it is not simplistic or moralistic. What God is going after through this book is change deep inside our hearts. His wisdom sinks in as we mull over these Biblical proverbs slowly and thoughtfully. We need multiple exposures over time. This book is not a quick fix. It is ancient wisdom from long human experience endorsed by God himself. If we'll pay close attention, God will graciously make us into profound people.

The book of Proverbs is a gospel book, because it is part of the Bible. That means the book of Proverbs is good news for bad people. It is about grace for sinners. It is about hope for failures. It is about wisdom for idiots. This book is Jesus himself coming to us as our counselor, as our sage, as our life coach. The Lord Jesus Christ is a competent thinker for all times and all cultures. He is a genius. And he freely offers us, even us, his unique wisdom. Do you remember how he concluded his Sermon on the Mount? He defined the gospel as a call to wisdom: "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be *like a wise man* who built his house on the rock. . . . And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be *like a foolish man* who built his house on the sand" (Matthew 7:24, 26). Jesus is our priest and our prophet, but in the book of Proverbs we encounter Jesus as our mentor. Do you see him that way? You can have him that way—the universe's greatest expert on you. He alone is qualified to have that kind of say in your life.

Let's not patronize Jesus Christ as a nice man who gives us warm religious fuzzies while we turn to the "experts" (whoever they are), the seriously qualified people, for the challenges of real life. Jesus Christ is the shrewdest man who ever lived. No one ever outthought him. No one ever

surprised him or cornered him in debate. He was always out ahead of everyone, both his friends and his enemies. Jesus Christ is the best counselor for all people in all seasons of life. The Old Testament prophesied that the Messiah would be anointed with the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, so that he would not judge by what his eyes see or decide disputes by what his ears hear (Isaiah 11:2, 3). In other words, our Messiah is not fooled by appearances or swayed by hearsay, like other leaders, even brilliant leaders. No one will ever pull the wool over his eyes. The Bible says that Jesus has eyes like a flame of fire, seeing through everything (Revelation 1:14). And God has given this super-smart expert to us as his best gift of amazing grace. The gospel says that Jesus *is* wisdom from God (1 Corinthians 1:30). It's why he surprises us. When he taught in his hometown synagogue, his neighbors were astonished and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom?" (Matthew 13:54). Solomon had been the wisest man in history. But when the Pharisees tested Jesus and he reminded them that the Queen of Sheba came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, she was so eager to learn, Jesus said to them, "Behold, something greater than Solomon is here" (Matthew 12:42). They didn't have to travel any distance. Wisdom incarnate was standing right there. But they were too sure of themselves to listen.

Let's not underrate what we have here in the book of Proverbs. Biblical wisdom is more than what we find in a fortune cookie. It is more than an optional add-on for people who want to upgrade their lives from, say, 4 to 7 on a scale of 1 to 10. This wisdom from Christ is a matter of life and death: "The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death" (Proverbs 13:14). What if we have many advantages in our lives but not wisdom? If we have love but not wisdom, we will harm people with the best of intentions. If we have courage but not wisdom, we will blunder boldly. If we have truth but not wisdom, we will make the gospel ugly to other people. If we have technology but not wisdom, we will use the best communications ever invented to broadcast stupidity. If we have revival but not wisdom, we'll use the power of God to throw the church into reverse gear. Jonathan Edwards wrote during the First Great Awakening, "When the devil finds he can keep men quiet and [complacent] no longer, then he drives them to excesses and extravagances. He holds them back as long as he can; but when he can do it no longer, then he will push them on and, if possible, run them upon their heads."<sup>2</sup> But wisdom knows how to spread the gospel with no embarrassing regrets.

Wisdom is the grace of Christ beautifying our daily lives. Paul said that

God has “lavished” his grace upon us “in all wisdom and insight” (Ephesians 1:7, 8). God’s grace is smart grace. The Bible says that in Christ are hidden “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). The wise way to live is not always obvious or intuitive or popular. It is hidden. Here’s where it is hidden: “We preach Christ crucified . . . the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:23, 24).

We must understand that there are two kinds of wisdom, and they are competing for our trust. The Bible calls them “the wisdom from above” and “the wisdom that . . . is earthly, unspiritual, demonic” (James 3:15, 17). Do you remember what Jesus said to Peter when Peter urged him not to go to the cross? Peter was saying, “Look, boss, there’s another way to go about this. Crosses are not a smart formula for success.” But Jesus said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! . . . For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (Matthew 16:21–23). How did Peter earn that stunning rebuke? Not by setting his mind on the things of Satan but just on the things of man—natural, understandable things, like survival. Peter was being wise with the wisdom that is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. Our natural wisdom panders to our pride and makes losing unthinkable. But J. R. R. Tolkien’s Ring Trilogy reminds us that our golden rings of power only make us weird, like Gollum. The key to life is not getting more of these golden rings but throwing them decisively away into the fires of Mount Doom. That humility is “the wisdom from above.”

Ah! God is other than we think, his ways are far above,  
Far beyond reason’s height and reached only by childlike love.

Then learn to scorn the praise of men, and learn to lose with God,  
For Jesus won the world through shame and beckons thee his road.<sup>3</sup>

That is the wisdom of the cross. That wisdom frees us from the distortions of our pride and opens the way to resurrection and new life. In *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, C. S. Lewis says the path of wisdom leads through a valley: “‘And what is this valley called?’ ‘We call it now simply Wisdom’s Valley; but the oldest maps mark it as the Valley of Humiliation.’”<sup>4</sup>

There is irony here. The wisdom of Proverbs started out historically for the training of leaders in ancient Israel.<sup>5</sup> It was written by kings and others in the royal court for young men in their teens and twenties whose future was bright with nobility. But we rise to that greatness and leadership and influence not our way, not by our natural strategies, but God’s way, through the cross, through humility. An old poem says:

When God wants to drill a man  
 And thrill a man  
 And skill a man  
 When God wants to mold a man  
 To play the noblest part

When He yearns with all His heart  
 To create so great and bold a man  
 That all the world shall be amazed,  
 Watch His methods, watch His ways!

How He ruthlessly perfects  
 Whom He royally elects!  
 How He hammers him and hurts him  
 And with mighty blows converts him  
 Into shapes and forms of clay  
 Which only God can understand

How He bends but never breaks  
 When his good He undertakes  
 How He uses whom He chooses  
 And with mighty power infuses him  
 With every act induces him  
 To try His splendor out—  
 God knows what He's about.

Wisdom is the gospel of Christ reshaping us for royalty, as God places us on his anvil and we trust him enough to stay there until his work is done.

Here is how the book of Proverbs is designed. It is an anthology—that is, a collection of writings from several authors. Solomon is listed as the author, because he contributed the most and because he's the famous one. But after the title in 1:1—"The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel"—then the purpose of the book is stated in 1:2–6. That's where we find out what God will accomplish in us through this book. The theme or motto of the book is famously stated in 1:7: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction." Then the rest of chapters 1–9 is a series of poems selling wisdom to us, motivating us to get into the book and receive its teachings with an eager heart. Chapters 1–9 make the case as to why we should care. Then look at 10:1, where we read, "The proverbs of Solomon." This is where the proverbs as such begin. Chapters 1–9 are all introductory. They are connected discourses, rather like psalms. But when the proverbs themselves begin in chapter 10, the style changes. Instead of lengthy, unified sections, each verse is its own tiny unit. So after chapters 1–9 I will bring together vari-

ous proverbs that address wisdom-issues in our lives—for example, how to use money, how to be a family, how to use words, and so forth. All the proverbs from 10:1—22:16 come from Solomon himself. Then in Proverbs 22:17 we read, “Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise.” Proverbs 22:17—24:22 is the next collection within the anthology. This section is known as The Thirty Sayings of the Wise. Then in Proverbs 24:23, the next collection begins: “These also are sayings of the wise,” and that brief section runs through verse 34 of that chapter. Then in 25:1—29:27 we have more proverbs of Solomon: “These also are proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied” (25:1). The last two collections in the book are “The words of Agur son of Jakeh. The oracle” (30:1–33) and “The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him” (31:1–31). So there are seven major sections in the book of Proverbs—the introduction in chapters 1—9, followed by six collections of proverbs by Solomon and other divinely inspired geniuses.

What then is at stake for you and me in the book of Proverbs? Why does this book deserve our endless fascination? T. S. Eliot spoke to our times when he asked these questions:

Where is the life we have lost in living?  
 Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
 Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?<sup>6</sup>

In our chaotic lives of constant stop-start-stop-start short-attention-span mental habits, with an endless stream of momentarily visible Twitter-feed fragments of information, we have been reduced to one splinter factoid after another, and we are trying to patch together some kind of elegant whole worth living. That is difficult. But the problem is not just that we are fidgety and distracted; it’s that our information, however much we have, is no basis for a life. We need Jesus to rescue us from our information and even from our knowledge. We need Jesus to counsel us with a new (and yet ancient) wisdom that comes from him. Then we can live. That is what is at stake here—our living rather than our dying. And Christ speaks to us for our living calmly, patiently, lovingly, seriously through the book of Proverbs.

This book works when we deliberately slow down and listen and think and journal and pray. For many years Billy Graham read one chapter of the book of Proverbs every day in order each month, because there are 31 chapters in the book.<sup>7</sup> We need that too. In his article “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” Nicholas Carr helps us to see how we are being changed and therefore how we need to change back:

As the media theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out in the 1960s, media are not just passive channels of information. They supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought. And what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.<sup>8</sup>

It is time to get off our information high, pick up the Bible, and go deep. But the biggest challenge is not in our surroundings. It is internal to ourselves. We bring a precondition into our counseling sessions with Jesus.

The book of Proverbs uses a certain Hebrew word to describe us as we start out. It is the word *petî*.<sup>9</sup> It shows up in our English Bibles as “simple” (ESV), “naive” (NASB), “ignorant” (JB). We do not like being told we are simple, naive, and ignorant. But we can put away our feeling of insult and be glad, because the Bible does not idealize us. The Bible sets the bar low, where beginners like us can get traction and succeed. I am reminded of my sixth grade report card from Allendale Elementary School, Pasadena, California, 1960-61, which I have before me now. Mrs. Karpé was my long-suffering teacher. How was I doing? Reading, C. Math, C-. Social Studies, D. Art, C. Work and Study Habits, C-. Mrs. Karpé’s written comment was:

Buddy is not working up to grade level requirement. He has a tendency to procrastinate, lose his work, then panics. He has a promising “potential,” but I would like to see him exercise it, do something about it.

In response to which my dad wrote in the following space for the parent’s comments:

Buddy is going to take a far greater interest in all of his work at school. Please give us a progress report in one month. We will contact you. Thanks for your interest.

I was a *petî*. And the proof of it was not my age or even my performance but just that I didn’t much care. But in God’s mercy I had a teacher and a dad who did care. I am thankful because “No one left to himself ever arrives at wisdom.”<sup>10</sup>

This word *petî* is related to a Hebrew verb that means “to be open.” A *petî* keeps his options open. He is uncommitted. He may even see himself as above commitment. But it gets him into trouble: “The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it” (Proverbs

22:3; 27:12). Why does a *petî* keep doing that? Because he does not *want* to make up his mind and commit himself: “How long, O simple ones, will you *love* being simple?” (Proverbs 1:22). Martyn Lloyd-Jones drills down into our problem:

You will never make yourself feel that you are a sinner, because there is a mechanism in you as a result of sin that will always be defending you against every accusation. We are all on very good terms with ourselves, and we can always put up a good case for ourselves. Even if we try to make ourselves feel that we are sinners, we will never do it. There is only one way to know that we are sinners, and that is to have some dim, glimmering conception of God.<sup>11</sup>

Until we come alive to God, it seems cool to stand aloof and laugh at everything. It feels superior. But it is foolish, because we are not neutral. We do not have our little devilish nature sitting on one shoulder tempting us and our little angelic nature sitting on the other shoulder restraining us. We have no angel. We have only a devil of a heart telling us we are angels, and we believe it. That guilty naiveté about ourselves is how we are born. It’s why we hate correction. Theologians call it Original Sin, and it is very real. We need Jesus to save us, first and foremost, from not needing to be saved.

As we launch our study of Proverbs, let’s so humble ourselves that we are enthusiastic about Jesus saving us from ourselves. We are born proud and defensive. It makes us negative, whiny, suspicious, unsatisfiable, squandering our opportunity in life. But then we are reborn by grace into newness and repentance and freedom as we listen to our Wonderful Counselor who loves us better than we love ourselves. That new humility is “the fear of the LORD” and “the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). That is how we begin our journey into wisdom, and it remains a lifelong, moment-by-moment attitude adjustment:

Believers may not often realize it, but even as believers we are either centered on man or centered on God. There is no alternative. Either God is the center of our universe and we have become rightly adjusted to him, or we have made ourselves the center and are attempting to make all else orbit around us and for us.<sup>12</sup>

Even in the small things of everyday life, Christ wants to be our true center. Then we learn to be wise. Then we really start to live.

In Proverbs 9, the elegant Lady Wisdom and the seductive Woman Folly are standing on either side of the road calling out, “Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!” (Proverbs 9:4, 16). What happens to us if we turn

toward Folly? We start down a path from being a *petî* to becoming hardened into a “scoffer” who cannot come back. “A scoffer seeks wisdom in vain” (Proverbs 14:6).

What happens to us if we commit to Wisdom? “The path of life leads upward for the wise; they leave the grave behind” (Proverbs 15:24, NLT). True wisdom is walking further with Jesus than we’ve ever gone before, further than we’ve ever dreamed of going. It is not risky. All we leave behind is the grave. All we leave behind is our stupidity and futility and ultimate damnation. But his path is marked by promise every step of the way. Here is his promise to every fool who chooses the way of his cross: “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

Let’s walk his way together.



## 2

# Let's Begin

1:1-7

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.*

PROVERBS 1:7



IN OUR DAILY LIVES we need more than rules. Sometimes life is too complex for a simple rule. We need wisdom to fill in the blanks moment by moment, and God gives us his wisdom in the book of Proverbs. But we need wisdom for another reason. It is possible to live by all the rules and be ugly about it. We have all known people who were blameless, in their way, and we disliked them. But wisdom “will bestow on you a beautiful crown” (Proverbs 4:9). We want Jesus to place that crown on our heads, for his sake. Wise Christians and wise churches become radiantly attractive. The Bible says, “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders” (Colossians 4:5). How? More people are won for Christ by beauty than by rules.

We begin our journey deeper into God’s wisdom at Proverbs 1:1-7. The word “beginning” is seen in verse 7: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.” Everyone needs a new beginning with God. That is why we go to church and pray and receive the gospel. We want what only God can do for us, and the fear of the Lord is how we receive it. The fear of the Lord is both a doorway and a pathway. It is a new beginning, and it never ends. You can begin afresh with God today. You can say to him, “Lord, I know the rules fairly well. But the beauty of wisdom takes me much further with you. I want to go there.” You can walk through that doorway and get going on that pathway. The only price you will pay is letting God be God to you.

Proverbs 1:1–7 opens up the whole book. It divides this way: first, the title of the book, in verse 1; second, the goals of the book, in verses 2–6; third, the threshold of the book, in verse 7.

### The Title

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel. (Proverbs 1:1)

Two things stand out here: one, how this book communicates; two, where this book comes from.

*One: how this book communicates:* “The proverbs.” Proverbs are the literary strategy of this book. What is a proverb? In English a proverb is a short saying of practical truth that’s easy to remember, like “Look before you leap” or “A stitch in time saves nine.” Biblical proverbs are sound-bite-ish too, but they offer a lot more than common sense.

What then is a Biblical proverb? The Hebrew noun “proverb” is related to a verb that means “to represent, to be like.” So a proverb is a little model of reality, a little verbal representation of some aspect of our daily lives. And by picking a proverb up and turning it over and over and looking at it from all angles, we can see something about our lives before we step out into the actual reality. The world says, Live and learn. God is saying, Learn and live.<sup>1</sup>

Think of a proverb this way. When the Wright brothers flew their airplane for the first time in 1903, they knew it would take off. How did they know? They had built a wind tunnel where they tested different wing designs before they risked their necks in actual flight. That is what the proverbs are for. We can explore a real-life situation within the virtual reality of a proverb. We can know in advance what is going to fly and what is going to crash. Biblical wisdom tells us what life is really like.

*Two: where this book comes from:* “. . . of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.” One of the fascinating things about the book of Proverbs is that it does not often connect with the history of God’s people. Over and over the Bible calls us back to Abraham and Moses and the exodus and so forth. But the book of Proverbs does not do that. Not only so, but Proverbs 22:17—24:22 does parallel aspects of “The Instruction of Amenemope” from Egypt.<sup>2</sup> This is why some scholars perceive the wisdom of Proverbs as accessible without God. They see this wisdom as available to everyone in the same way—by being smart enough. And indeed we can learn from the best practices of smart people who do not claim Jesus. But the wisdom of Proverbs comes from “Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.” Right up front, the book tells us it stands in the flow of Biblical history, which

leads us to Jesus. Here is the point: The fear of the Lord Jesus Christ is the beginning of *this* wisdom.

What did Solomon understand that made such a difference? He connected the Lord with real life, all of it. First Kings 4:29–34 tells us that Solomon was a Renaissance man. He was fascinated by *everything*. He studied plants, from the cedars of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of a crack in a wall. He studied animals. He composed music. He did not compartmentalize God. He understood that everything is connected with our Creator, and therefore everything is interesting. Solomon was like Jonathan Edwards, who saw divine glory all around him. Here is how Edwards perceived reality:

God had created lower things to be signs that pointed to higher spiritual realities. The universe, then, was a complex language of God. Nothing in it was accidental. Everything pointed to a higher meaning. Scripture . . . was the key to reading the true meaning of everything else.<sup>3</sup>

The Biblical worldview opens up the higher meaning of money and sex and power and everything across the landscape of our lives. And we “get it” not by outsmarting someone else but by fearing the Lord. Solomon did. So can you, by God’s grace. Just let God be God to you.

### The Goals

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—<sup>4</sup>  
 to understand a proverb and a saying,  
     the words of the wise and their riddles. (Proverbs 1:2–6)

God has two goals for us in the book of Proverbs. Verse 2 states them. One is deep character, and the other is straight thinking. “To know wisdom and instruction”—that’s deep character. “To understand words of insight”—that’s straight thinking. Verses 3, 4 tell us more about deep character, and verse 6 tells us more about straight thinking. Verse 5 is a parenthesis, urging even wise people to keep growing. Everybody can take a new step with the Lord—the simple, the youthful, the wise. Everybody can be on a growth edge together. We can be a community of growing people.

What about God’s first purpose for us—deep character? “To know wisdom and instruction,” verse 2 says. We haven’t defined wisdom yet, so now is the time. What does the sage mean by “wisdom”? Wisdom is more than brains. It is more than morals. We could memorize the whole Bible, and mean it from the heart, without wisdom. Wisdom is skill, expertise, competence that understands how life really works, how to achieve successful and even beautiful results. We see a picture of wisdom in Exodus 35:31, where the word translated “wisdom” in Proverbs 1:2 is used for the skill of an artist adorning the tabernacle. We see wisdom in Jeremiah 10:9 where the expertise of goldsmiths is called “the work of skilled men,” or wise men. We see wisdom in Psalm 107:27 for the know-how of sailors, who use the winds and tides to make their way through the sea to their destination. Whether craftsmanship working with the materials of life or seamanship steering through the currents of life, so to speak, wisdom understands how real life can work well. Wisdom knows better than to walk onto the football field and hope the game will go well somehow; wisdom draws up a game plan that will score more touchdowns than the opponents because that plan takes into account not only the rules of the game but also psychology and timing and strategy and everything it takes to win. That is wisdom.

This is seen all through the Bible. *Perceiving wisdom* asks the hard questions about life and understands God’s answers. *Acting wisdom* guides us in our practical conduct every day. *Communicating wisdom* educates us in the school of the sages, as we see here in Proverbs 1:2–6.<sup>5</sup> We are being invited into the counsels of the best and the brightest.

Now if wisdom is so desirable, and it is, then why isn’t everyone running toward wisdom? Why is it rare? Because of the next word in verse 2: “instruction.” It is also translated “discipline” (NLT). Sorry, friends, but we are not born wise. We get into wisdom the hard way, through the Lord’s instruction and discipline, through being chastened and corrected. We do not like that. It is humiliating. It is hard to admit we are wrong. But we make progress in wisdom to the extent that we are teachable. I like how C. J. Mahaney put it in his book on humility: “I’m a proud man pursuing humility by the grace of God.”<sup>6</sup> We are foolish people pursuing wisdom by humbling ourselves under the Lord’s correction. Can any of us be above it? When we are honest enough with God to change, he puts that crown of beauty on our heads. It is what he wants to do.

Verse 3 is how we start. It is written from the learner’s point of view—“to receive instruction.” That word “receive” is the key that unlocks the door. The Bible says, “Receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able

to save your souls” (James 1:21). That simple humility, that openness, is how we gain velocity in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity—all so beautiful and powerful.

Verse 4 shifts to the teacher’s point of view: “to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth.” The simple, the young, gain three benefits from wisdom, according to verse 4. First, “prudence.” Do you like that word? I don’t. It seems so Victorian. It reminds me of the Beatles’ *White Album* and “Dear Prudence”:

Dear Prudence, won't you come out to play?  
 Dear Prudence, greet the brand new day  
 The sun is up, the sky is blue  
 It's beautiful and so are you  
 Dear Prudence, won't you come out to play?

She needed to have some fun! Is there another translation of this Hebrew word? Yes, there is: “shrewdness” (NRSV). I like that word. And it is faithful to the Hebrew text. Shrewdness is a good kind of cunning. In this world we need that. Shrewdness is tactics that succeed when so much is on the line.

Second, “knowledge.” What does everyone need to know? The very thing our popular theories deny, namely, that there is an inescapable link between deed and consequence. We think we can create our own designer lives, even new selves, by force of raw choice. But the truth is, reality is not made-to-order. We cannot make it up as we go. We were born into a pre-existing order that God created long ago. We need to know what that order is and how it works in relationships, in finances, in sex, in every area of life, so that we can stop shooting ourselves in the foot. If we know, we can adjust, and we can thrive.

Third, “discretion.” That is the caginess that sees through the temptations coming at us every day, for example, through advertising. God wants to give us the deep character that can’t be fooled anymore. He can help us outfox our temptations.

Verses 3, 4 are how we start out, as beginners. Verse 5 tells us that even seasoned veterans can keep on learning: “Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance.” Let’s be realistic about ourselves—as we age, it can be harder to stay fresh and expectant and moving forward on an upward trajectory of growth. It is easy to stall, it is easy to coast. We can get lazy. But let’s not die before we die! Fight for open-mindedness and honesty and discovery and newness of life. Stay humble and keep learning. The Apostle Paul did. Even in his final days, he wanted to

keep reading and studying and learning (2 Timothy 4:6, 13). That's how we can be a blessing to younger people too.

God wants to give every one of us deep character. That is the first of his two purposes in this book. His second purpose is straight thinking. Look back to the second line of verse 2: "to understand words of insight." What does God have for us here? Think of the difference between Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. You know how a client would walk into Holmes's apartment at 221B Baker Street and Sherlock Holmes could take one look and know nineteen things about him, and it was always "Elementary, my dear Watson." Dr. Watson saw the same person, but not with the same insight. This word "insight" means that the non-obvious can become obvious to you. The immature might not see what you see. They might even misunderstand you. This happens often between parents and children. But, parents, it is your role to be the Sherlock Holmes of your family. Don't surrender that to your kids. They don't have enough insight yet. They need yours.

Verse 6 tells us more about straight thinking: "to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles." Picture it this way. As we come to the book of Proverbs, we are approaching a community of wisdom, a group of people standing around talking together, men and women, who are Yoda-smart. We beginners sidle up to this circle of amazing people. We see, there in the circle of "the wise," Solomon and Isaiah and Paul and Augustine and Luther and other remarkable people we have known personally and admired. We start listening to the conversation going on inside that circle. We overhear words and concepts we do not understand at first, so we have to stick with it to catch on. But as we do, we begin to leave behind our shallow entertainment mindset with its effortless, pat answers that in fact have always failed us. As we listen to the wise, we grow. We, even we, become profound people too. The final reason for this, of course, is not us, and not even them. According to verse 7, *God* is there. The wise are letting God be God to them.

### The Threshold

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;  
fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:7)

Verse 7 is the theme of the book of Proverbs. If we distilled the whole book into one drop, it would be verse 7. What is the fear of the Lord? The structure of this verse is itself suggestive. Hebrew poetry was written in parallel lines—an A-line, then a B-line, and the B-line clarifies the A-line. So how does the second line help us here? The key is the word "despise." That

is an emotional word, a word of contempt and relational aloofness. It is the arrogance of being above instruction, too smart for it, too good for it, too busy for it. Such a “fool” might be a gifted person, but he does not “feel the need for moral cleansing.”<sup>7</sup> What then is the fear of the Lord? It is not a cringing dread before the Lord. It is not a guilty “Oh no, here comes God. I’m in for it now.” The fear of the Lord is openness to him, eagerness to please him, humility to be instructed by him (Proverbs 15:33).<sup>8</sup> The fear of the Lord is a willingness to turn from evil and change (Job 28:28). The fear of the Lord is surrender to his will (Genesis 22:12). The fear of the Lord is one way we love him (Deuteronomy 6:2, 5). The fear of Christ is meekly fitting in with one another (Ephesians 5:21, literally translated). The fear of the Lord is when we realize, “I am not the measure of all things. I am being measured.” That reverence toward God, perhaps surprisingly, builds our confidence and flows out as a “fountain of life” into everyone and everything we care about (Proverbs 14:26, 27). It takes us to that place of maturity where no one has to follow us around with a tedious list of do’s and don’t’s, constantly telling us what to do. We are motivated from deep within. We know what is right, and it is what we love, because it is of God.

This wonderful fear of the Lord is where we begin our journey into wisdom. It is how we keep making progress all the way. It opens our eyes, and it keeps them open. C. S. Lewis wrote:

In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that—and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison—you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud, you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.<sup>9</sup>

That realism runs opposite to the dominant thinking of our modern age. In his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes famously wrote, “I think, therefore I am.”<sup>10</sup> He wanted certainty. He wanted to know what is real. So he did what seemed obvious. He started doubting everything, to find out what would be left. He whittled away at everything until he noticed that he was still there, he was real, the one doubting. He could not doubt that: “I think [that is, doubt], therefore I am.” So Descartes, the father of modern thought, started rebuilding reality outward from himself. For over 300 years our culture has been trying to live that way, building our civilization and our personal lives on ourselves. It has failed. Absolutizing our own capacity for generating knowledge and hope and certainty exposes us to self-deception, as post-

modernism has shown. The autonomous Self cannot create certainty, much less beauty, but it certainly can be fooled. Every one of us is living proof of that.

The Bible reverses Descartes: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.” Knowledge starts within God, and then it moves toward us. He must reveal it by grace, and we must receive it in humility. Verse 7 is saying that what your ABC’s are to reading Shakespeare, what playing the scales are to performing Bach, what  $2 + 2 = 4$  is to doing calculus, the fear of the Lord is to wisdom. We start there, and we never leave it behind. Our search for reality can go wrong not only because of miscalculations along the way but also because of one grand blunder at the start—leaving God out, and making ourselves the judges of everything.<sup>11</sup>

But it can be extremely painful to learn the fear of the Lord. It is death to our narcissistic egos and self-assured opinions and superior neutrality. But we do not change for the better by turning inward. We change as we turn outward and upward to the Lord with an awakened sense of his sheer reality, his moral beauty, his eternal grandeur, infinitely above us but relevant to us. Our true crisis is not informational but relational. It is *he*, the risen and living Lord Jesus Christ, to whom we must pay close attention, if we are ever going to learn anything. That means we must forsake the fool within, named Self, decisively and endlessly. “Change of being, *metanoia*, is not brought about by straining and ‘will-power’ but by a long deep process of unselfing.”<sup>12</sup> There is no other way.

Wise people humbly revere God and lovingly live to please him. Mr. Beaver explained why: “Safe? Who said anything about safe? “Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”<sup>13</sup> Do you revere God that way? Have you experienced how freeing it is to humble yourself before your superior, Jesus Christ? Getting down low before him—that is where we all belong. It is not degrading. It is profound. Remember *The Wind in the Willows*, when Rat and Mole go looking for the baby otter and stumble into the presence of God:

Suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror—indeed, he felt wonderfully at peace and happy. . . .

“Rat!” he found breath to whisper, shaking. “Are you afraid?”

“Afraid?” murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. “Afraid! Of *Him*? O, never, never! And yet—and yet—O, Mole, I am afraid!”

Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.<sup>14</sup>

If you would like to experience God with that humility, here is how you can. You look at the cross. You see a wise man hanging there, dying in the place of fools like you, because he loves you. You may despise him, but he does not despise you. You may be above him, but he humbled himself for you. Look there at him. Look away from yourself. Look at him, and keep looking until your pride melts. You will not only worship, you will begin to grow wise.

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