

Wisdom Proverbs

June 23, 2019
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Last Sunday we began our summer series in Proverbs. It was Father's Day, so we focused on what Proverbs has to say to dads and kids. We didn't do a proper introduction to Proverbs, which we will do today. Proverbs' focus is wisdom and a life lived according to God's wisdom. This is contrasted in Proverbs with a life lived according to folly. Today we are going to ask ourselves who we are in Proverbs—the simple, the wise, or the fool?

The beginning of Proverbs is as close to an introduction as we get as it summarizes 31 chapters, which are collections of teachings on the wise life.

"The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth— Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction." (Proverbs 1:1-7 ESV)

The Backstory of Proverbs

Solomon wrote much but not all of Proverbs

You may know the story of God offering Solomon anything he would ask. Solomon asks God for insight and wisdom to lead his people (1 Kings 3:5-9). God says because you didn't ask for money or power, I will give you those AND I will make you the wisest to ever live. God made Solomon rich and wise beyond any person of his time. The riches are gone, but the wisdom is still here in Proverbs. As Ecclesiastes is likely sourced in Solomon, together with Proverbs we see the incredible insights God gave him.

We must realize the intellectual culture of the day. We may think the ancient man was intellectually inferior. But Israel and other kingdoms highly valued knowledge, philosophy, and the collecting of wisdom. There are other ancient manuscripts that collate wise sayings, many of which are remarkably close to what we find in Proverbs.

Do you remember the Queen of Sheba? She came from the kingdom of Ethiopia, an ancient version of Wakanda. Why did she travel so far to come to Solomon's court? She heard of his wisdom. Today political leaders value money, power, and political shrewdness. Back then you filled your courts with men like Mordecai and Daniel—men of tremendous wisdom who are admired even to this day.

At the head of the list of ancient wise men is Solomon. Much of Proverbs is attributed to him, particularly chapters 10 and following. Solomon's authorship is directly attributed to a third of the book. Likely other sections as well. Other authors here include Agur and Lemuel. Who were they? We don't know. Proverbs is an encyclopedia of Israel's pursuit of wisdom.

While other kingdoms had wisdom literature, what makes the Proverbs of the Bible unique from them is its starting point—the fear of Yahweh, the fear of the Lord.

Wisdom on the street level of life

The movement of the book is from broad appeals to live out the fear of the Lord to prudent and practical ways to do so. There is much in Proverbs that anyone can benefit from. However, the root of Proverbs is deep in the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Israel and Yahweh's desire to flourish and bless his people.

The form most of them take is short, terse, pithy, memorable little sayings that follow Hebrew forms of poetry which have less to do with rhyming words as rhyming thoughts or contrasting truths. For example, take our little proverb, "A stitch in time saves nine." In English that works because the meter and rhyme make it memorable. We have many such little sayings, "*Take care of the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves.*" "*A bird in the hand is better than two in the bush.*" "*Birds of a feather flock together.*"

Proverbs rhymes truths rather than words. My friend David Murray wrote a great article¹ on Proverbs that helps much of this sermon. He calls Proverbs Old Testament Twitter. Imagine these as tweets from the wisest man who ever lived. If he put one new one out a day, how many followers would the wisest man who ever lived have?

Truth not truism

A caution with Proverbs. The genre of wisdom literature is intended to describe life and prudent living in general principles that are true. But if we make these proverbs more than general principles and require them to be specifically true in every possible situation, we will be asking more of them than God intended. Don't make them truisms; don't make them laws that God's sovereignty and providence must always comply.

The classic example is Proverbs 22:6, "*Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.*" (Proverbs 22:6) There's a general principle that is true. Is it always true? Does every single child raised in the way he or she should go end up going that way? No. Clearly no. Solomon's own son Rehoboam is included in the list. Many a parent has been disillusioned with Proverbs by a prodigal son they thought had to follow God because that is how they were raised. It is generally true that children follow the paths their parents lead them on, and it is generally true that if you don't train up your child to follow God they won't.

The Simple, the Wise, and the Fool

With that background I want to introduce you to the three main characters of Proverbs. The simple, the wise, and the fool. Proverbs is 915 verses exposing us and identifying us as either the simpleton, the wise, or the fool. We are introduced to these in 1:7 which is the theme thought of Proverbs: "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.*" (Proverbs 1:7)

The wise

Knowledge and wisdom are sisters in Proverbs. "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.*" (Proverbs 9:10) If there is a distinction, it would be that wisdom is the prudent application of knowledge to life, but they are somewhat interchangeable. The wise man (or woman) in Proverbs is the one who

¹ David Murray, "Discovering Jesus in Old Testament Proverbs," www.faithgateway.com, March 18, 2014.

appropriates God's wisdom into their heart which gives them moral and spiritual GPS in the directions and decisions of their lives.

Wisdom is presented in Proverbs as a virtuous principle by which God himself is guided. Listen to this description of wisdom's role in creation.

"The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old...Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth, before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world. When he established the heavens, I was there; ...when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man." (Proverbs 8:22, 25-27, 29-31)

I'm getting ahead of myself, but does this sound a little like John 1:1, *"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God"*? Could you not replace Word with wisdom, *in the beginning was wisdom and wisdom was with God and wisdom was God*? We must see wisdom not as ethereal, but as signposts of the one who embodies all wisdom, Jesus the Son of God. In him, all the wisdom of God dwells.

Wisdom is a virtuous and holy principle in which God delights and is pleased to share with us through creation and in his holy Word. The wise are those who delight in it and allow it to shape the decisions and directions of their lives.

Wisdom isn't being intellectually smart or knowing many facts and figures. I recently got caught up in the *Jeopardy* craze with James Holzhauer. The guy was amazing! He made two million dollars and his knowledge of trivia is hard to believe. Does being incredible on *Jeopardy* mean you are wise? No. None of us are born with this wisdom. It must be cultivated. Who are the wise?

The wise in Proverbs are those with an internal compass toward success in this life, and especially, in the next life.

The wise are contrasted with two other main characters. The simple and the fool.

The fool

The fool is the foil of the wise. Whatever the wise are, the fool is the opposite.

- *"Doing wrong is like a joke to a fool, but wisdom is pleasure to a man of understanding."* (Proverbs 10:23)
- *"The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice."* (Proverbs 12:15)
- *"Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm."* (Proverbs 13:20)
- *"One who is wise is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is reckless and careless."* (Proverbs 14:16)
- *"Why should a fool have money in his hand to buy wisdom when he has no sense?"* (Proverbs 17:16)
- *"A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion."* (Proverbs 18:2)
- *"Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered."* (Proverbs 28:26)

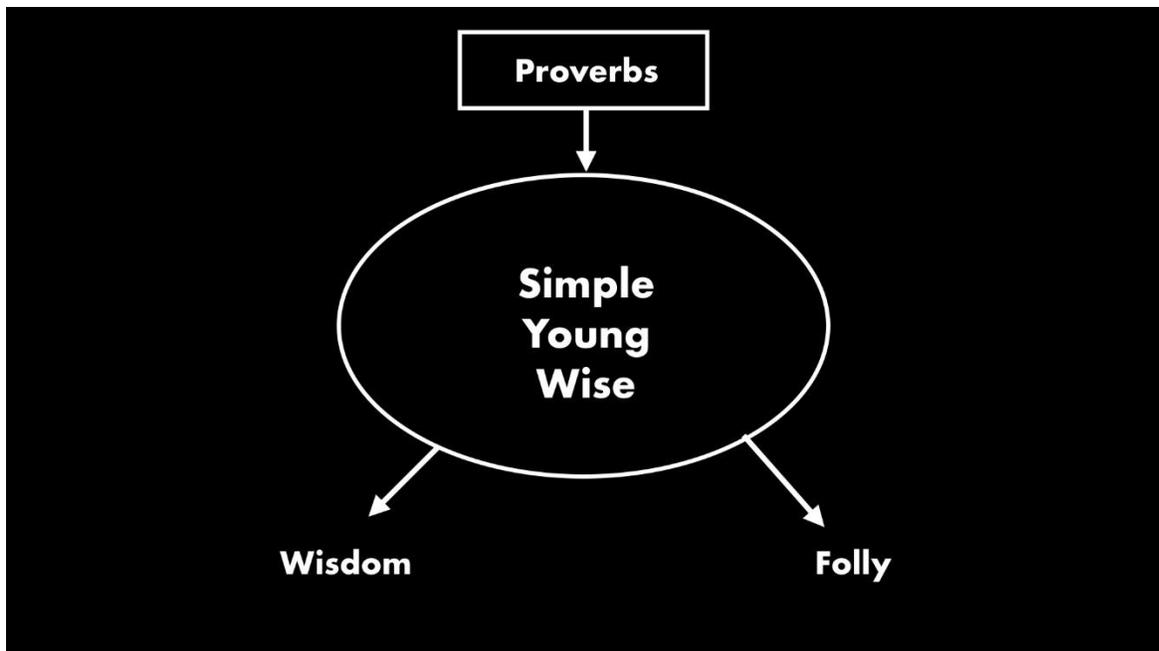
One proverb says you can tell a fool by the way he walks down the road. You kind of know what that looks like, don't you? The insolent swagger walking down the road even though their life choices don't allow them to afford a car. There's a demeanor that a fool has which the wise can discern but the non-wise don't pick up on.

The non-wise can be influenced by the fool, and particularly young people are all the time. Are their bedrooms decorated with pictures of wise people or foolish people? The wise overlook an offense. Not the fool. The wise listen to advice. Not the fool. The wise seek knowledge. Not the fool. The wise walk with the wise. Not the fool. The wise shun evil. Not the fool. The wise brings joy to his father and mother. Not the fool. The wise are slow to speak. Not the fool. The wise are under control. Not the fool.

Proverbs says the bottom line for the fool is there is no hope for him. These Proverbs are useless and silly to a fool. You can't argue a fool out of his folly. You can't even beat it out of him. He loves his folly and he is resolute in his life continuing in its foolish ways.

The simple

The third category are the simple. The simple are those who have not yet fallen into the absurdity of the fool's life but are not wise either. The simple are the morally naïve. They are childish in their outlook on life and lack the maturity to see what's truly valuable. They are easily swayed, like the simple man who is seduced to the adulteress' bedroom in Proverbs 5. He's like an ox being led to the slaughter. The simple are easily overcome by life's circumstances which wisdom could have saved them from. Proverbs 22:3 says, "*The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it.*"



They stand at the fork of the road of life.² Which path will they take? The wise. The simple. And the fool. Which one are you? Truth be told, most of us are tragic mixtures of all three with perhaps some moments of stellar wisdom, but some foolish failures as well. Here is the purpose of Proverbs. Back to chapter 1.

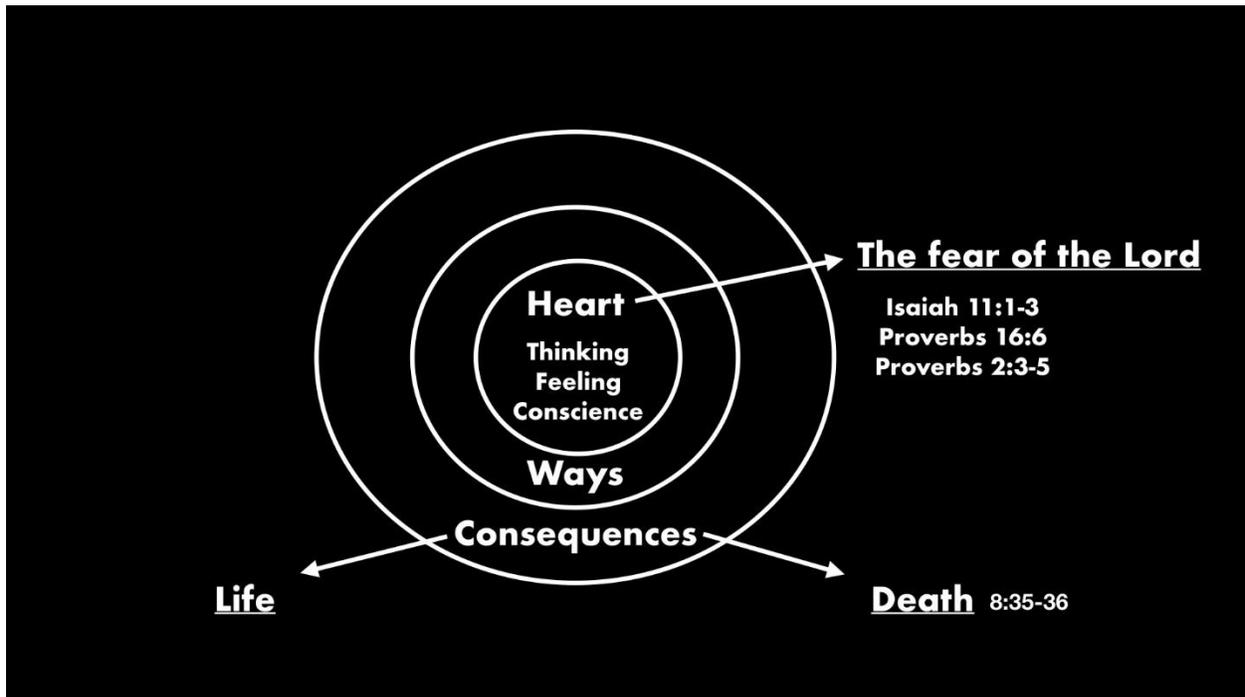
"The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth." (Proverbs 1:1-4)

There's no hope for the fool. The fool says, *I don't need this!* If that is you, you are going to hate a summer in Proverbs because it's all so silly. It doesn't connect with you. So, I'm not even going to try to convince you.

The purpose of Proverbs is to expose the fool, confirm the wise, and move the simple toward a life according to wisdom. Left to themselves, the simple are attracted to the self-centeredness of the fool and will trend foolish. Proverbs urges the simple to leave their simple ways.

So, Mr. Solomon, how do simple people standing at the fork of the road choose the path of wisdom?

Here is where Proverbs hints and the gospel reveals. This is Proverbs describing how wisdom works its way into the heart and transforms a life.

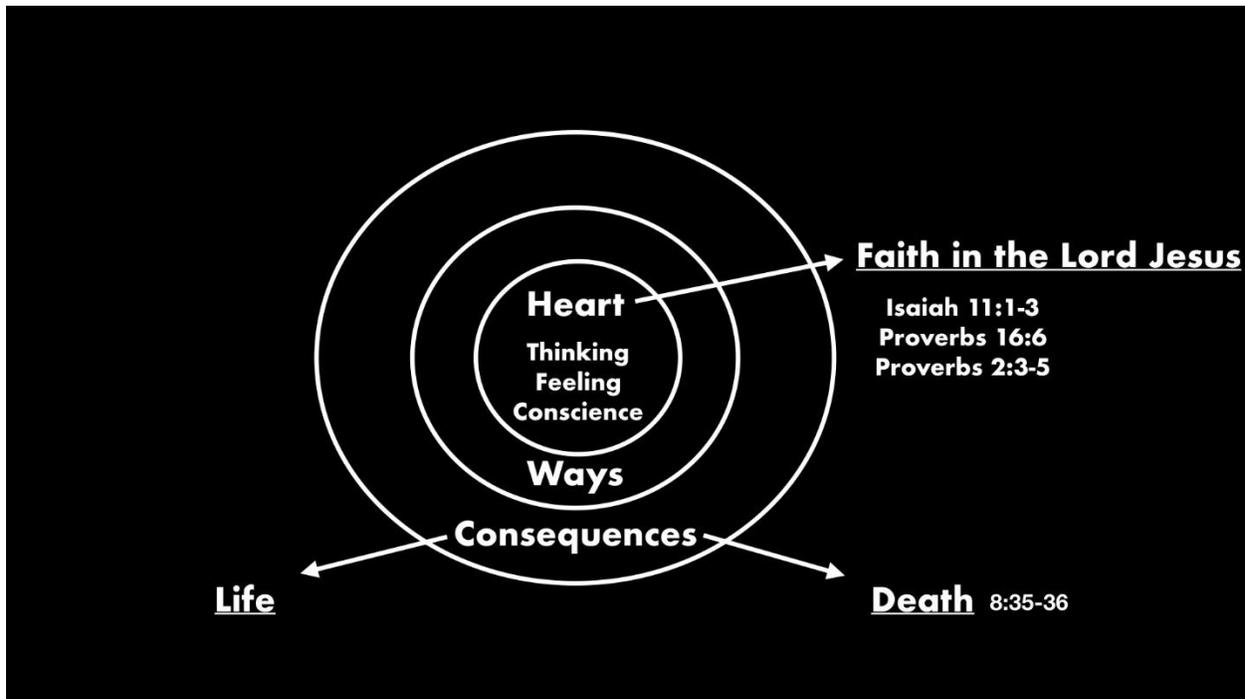


You have here this basic concept of the fear of the Lord. Again, this is not where I'm cowering; I am treasuring. I am reverencing. I am worshiping the Lord. He is the most important thing in my life. And that in my heart influences the way I think about things and

² Source of these charts is unknown.

the way I feel about things and my conscience even is dictated by this reverencing of God. If you look at these concentric circles, you see that when I am thinking the will of God, when I'm feeling the will of God, it changes the way I live. God has so ordered the world that there are consequences built into this society where if we live this way (way of death) these are the things that generally will happen to you. And if I live this way (way of life) these are the blessings that generally will happen to you. Proverbs is written to help us live wisely—for us, like the Israelites, to flourish in life. So, the ways and the consequences and Proverbs are going to emphasize them and there is a path of death and there is a path of life and Proverbs is urging us toward the path of life and obviously in the gospel, eternal life.

Or let me "New Testamentize" this:



We replace the fear of the Lord with faith in the Lord Jesus. Here on this side of the cross. How does this happen for us? It happens when I, by the grace of God, trust in Jesus as my Savior. Now Jesus assumes the throne of my heart. I am surrendering my life in faith and obedience to Jesus and that divine throne now is shaping the way I think about things and the way I feel about things and it shapes my conscience and it changes the way that I live. The Bible calls this repentance and obedience and sanctification. And the result is that the consequences of the direction of my life now being lived more consistent with the will of God increasingly lead toward life and shalom and flourishing and peace and the blessing of God.

I don't have to know you personally to know that you didn't wake up this morning thinking I want to be a colossal failure in my life. None of us do. We want to be successful in the eyes of God especially. And we desire those blessings in our life. And so the question that Proverbs asks is, *do you have the fear of the Lord in your heart?* The question the gospel asks is *do you have faith in the Lord Jesus?* Over time, we are living on either the side of death or we are living out the life of Jesus Christ—living according to his will and purpose in our lives. And Proverbs urges us to live that way.

How does God transform our lives? He does it from the inside out. He does it by regeneration and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and his work of transformation. Jesus is the embodiment of the wisdom of God. We all are moral fools. We all are sinners. We all are following our own way. But then God does what Proverbs can't do. He makes the fool wise by the gift of faith in Jesus and the supernatural work of the Spirit whereby we cry out Abba Father. Fools don't say that, but gospel-wise people do.

- *"And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption."* (1 Corinthians 1:30)
- *"In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."* (Colossians 2:3)
- *"But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."* (1 Corinthians 1:23-24)

You might say, *but I like Proverbs more than I like the gospel. I think Proverbs is so much more practical and gives me lots of advice for how to live my life. I'm more of an Old Testament guy. Give me Twitter truth, not gospel truth.*

"The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here." (Matthew 12:42)

Jesus is wiser than Solomon and the gospel is greater wisdom than even Proverbs. Be wise enough to *"trust in [Jesus] with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths"* (Proverbs 3:5-6)

If you like Proverbs, you will love Jesus. But like a proverb is useless in the mind of a fool, the gospel seems foolish unless the Spirit of God works in us.

"For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Corinthians 1:21-25)

Proverbs shows us how often we are the fool and need a Savior.

Do you lack wisdom? James 1:5 says, ask God! Asking God for wisdom is itself wise. But the wisest thing any of us can and will ever do, is for fear of the Lord to lead to faith IN the Lord Jesus. The wise man gladly surrenders his whole life and eternity to Jesus. I know we are not in Romans, but can I sneak one in?

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2)

There it is. The wisdom of God in the gospel transforms our minds and hearts so that we discern and desire God's will, and the decision and directions of our lives conform to that good, acceptable, and perfect will. That is not the fool. That is not the simple. That is the wisdom of God through the gospel by the Spirit living in the life of the believer, directing our paths toward his glory and our success in this life and the next.

Jesus knew this. He talks about a builder. The foolish man built his house upon the sand.³ The foolish man built his house upon the sand. The foolish man built his house upon the sand. And the rains came tumbling down. I'm just trying to contextualize to Indiana this year. The rains came down and the floods came up. The rains came down and the floods came up. The rains came down and the floods came up. And the house on the sand fell flat! But the wise man built his house upon the Rock. The wise man built his house upon the Rock. The wise man built his house upon the Rock. And the rains came tumbling down. The rains came down and the floods came up. The rains came down and the floods came up. The rains came down and the floods came up. And the house on the Rock stood firm.

And who is the rock? Jesus is the rock. Build your life on him and his wisdom. Don't be the fool. Be the wise. Amen.

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³ Ann Omley, "The Wise Man and the Foolish Man," 1948.