

**PROVERBS
FOR YOU**

KATHLEEN NIELSON
PROVERBS
FOR YOU

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COMPANY



Proverbs For You

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centred
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Proverbs For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary towards the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

Bible translations used:

- ESV: English Standard Version (this is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated)
- NIV: New International Version, 2011 edition
- KJV: King James Version (also known as the Authorized Version)

INTRODUCTION TO PROVERBS

Wanted: Wisdom

Human beings are and always have been in need of wisdom. Wisdom helps us make decisions about what work to do; what to say (or not say); what person to marry (or avoid). Wisdom points us to habits that tend to make life smoother and happier. Wisdom gives shape and meaning to our cries of both suffering and delight. In general, wisdom offers insight into the concrete experiences of human life.

That's the commonly understood sense of wisdom. Who is not in need of it? Cultures throughout history have given ear to various sorts of **sages** who passed on their wisdom through words; today, we have popular bloggers, personal life coaches, authors of best-sellers about success, health, and happiness. Many people look for wisdom to well-known media figures like the American Oprah Winfrey, whose self-empowering sayings have been collected and recorded on dozens of website pages—Oprah's proverbs, you might say!

The Bible offers **God-breathed*** wisdom. This wisdom is utterly recognizable in that (like popular wisdom) it offers insight into the concrete experiences of human life. But it's also utterly different. The Bible's wisdom offers godly insight into the concrete experiences of human life in a world created and ruled by the Lord God of the Scriptures.

Although wisdom writing appears throughout the Scriptures, three "wisdom books" stand out: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes (with Song of Solomon often included). These books offer God-breathed wisdom in varying tones—like different kinds of music. Job and Ecclesiastes are like somber symphonies, engaging life's deepest, darkest questions. Song of Solomon is more like a lyrical opera, celebrating the love of husband and wife. Proverbs is more like a piano lesson, covering scales and basic chords—the stuff that makes up all the music—although

* Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary (page 243).

it regularly breaks out into songs of various styles. The wisdom book of Proverbs addresses the spectrum of human activities and concerns that make up daily life: from eating and drinking, to the way we speak to one another, to family and social relationships, to sex, to business dealings, and on and on.

The more we read the book of Proverbs, the more we understand our need for its wisdom to speak into our often chaotic daily experiences. The wisdom of Proverbs calls us to see all the experiences of our lives in relation to the Lord who created and rules the world, who calls us first to fear him, and who himself shows us how.

Alert: Mind the Shape!

Proverbs acknowledges and even reflects the random-feeling progression of activities and concerns that fill our days. At the same time, this book comes to us carefully shaped by writers and editors led by God as they assembled and arranged this part of his holy Scriptures. The basic outline of Proverbs is clear:

1. Prologue (1:1-7)
2. The Foundation of Wisdom (1:8 – 9:18)
3. The Proverbs of Solomon (10:1 – 22:16)
4. The Words of the Wise (22:17 – 24:22)
5. More Sayings of the Wise (24:23-34)
6. The Proverbs of Solomon copied by King Hezekiah's Men (25:1 – 29:27)
7. The Words of Agur (30:1-33)
8. The Words of King Lemuel (31:1-9)
9. Epilogue (31:10-31)

I read Proverbs for too many years without paying close attention to the way this piece of wisdom literature holds together from

beginning to end. Now, there is benefit in isolating and learning from Proverbs' distinct themes; many, myself included, have organized studies around the book's teachings on topics like words, work, family, friendships, generosity, the heart, and of course first and foremost the **fear of the Lord**.

But we must be on the alert when we rearrange this book into an order that satisfies us. The greatest risk is that we might not fully receive the book as it is given to us, in God's **sovereign** plan, from beginning to end. For the sake of clarity and efficiency, we might miss not the brilliance of the individual themes but rather the crucial relationship of the parts. We might overlook the way individual proverbs echo and play back and forth within and among passages. We might not see how the big chunks of the book together inform our most basic understanding of how to seek and process godly wisdom.

A predominantly thematic focus also could distract from careful attention to the shape of the poetry—originally written in Hebrew but amazingly accessible to us in translation. Part of what we must notice (and delight in) is the way the poetic form is wedded to the thematic and **theological** content. For example, part of what helps us to understand wisdom's two paths of wisdom and folly is the pairing of poetic lines, many of which express the contrast of these two ways. Not until we get to Proverbs 10 will we stop and discuss the poetry in detail, but at every point we will be noticing how the poetry works: through **parallelism** and vivid imagery that, in artfully condensed form, call us to wisdom.

A reasonably short treatment of Proverbs like this one can only begin to take account of the whole book, with its wealth of insights. But let's begin. Let's see how the first nine chapters establish a foundation for all that follows—a foundation that keeps reappearing and even deepening, at crucial points in the book. Let's taste the flavors of the various proverb collections built on that foundation, and let's hear the themes develop and wind around one another—kind of like they do in a day of real life!

I hope this trip through Proverbs will help make the book shine, as a beautifully shaped call to hear and follow wisdom from our Lord. I hope this will be an overview that inspires lifelong deep digging into the wisdom of Proverbs. We need this wisdom. And this wisdom comes to us in a remarkable book of wisdom literature, which we do well first to read and study in its God-given literary form.

Ahead: Jesus Shining

The book of Proverbs has sometimes been held in low regard for seemingly lacking the gospel-rich content that we find, for example, in the **Pentateuch**, which tells us redemption's story, or in the prophetic writings that point to a servant-king. Proverbs doesn't talk much about where and how to worship. It almost seems kind of... worldly.

Proverbs is worldly indeed, in that it shows godly wisdom infusing every part of God's created world. That's the point. Nothing in this world has meaning apart from the Creator of all things. Everything has meaning in relation to the One who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth and everything in them.

Proverbs is worldly, in that it shows godly wisdom infusing every part of God's world. That's the point.

We will see that Proverbs does not establish as its foundation an abstract truth about God, the sovereign Creator and Ruler. No, Proverbs sets forth a foundational relationship with this Lord God: one that involves fearing him. Here is the decisive distinction between commonly understood wisdom and the Bible's wisdom: the Bible's wisdom calls us into a relationship with the Lord—a relationship that transforms every part of our lives, forever.

The Scriptures unfold the salvation that makes possible a relationship between **fallen**, sinful people and their holy Creator. God

so loved the world that he gave his only Son (John 3:16). That Son became flesh and dwelt in the world he created; Jesus lived out the worldly wisdom that Proverbs is all about. In fact, Jesus is the worldly wisdom that Proverbs is all about. The New Testament affirms Christ as our “wisdom from God” (1 Corinthians 1:24). In him “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). This is the Christ who bore our sin and died suffering God’s wrath in our place, and who rose from the dead, our resurrected Savior.

The treasures of wisdom hidden in Christ are eternal treasures: Jesus Christ is the eternal second Person of the **Godhead**. There has never been wisdom anywhere else but in him, from eternity past. The various poetic pictures of wisdom in Proverbs point us nowhere but to the source.

But let’s dig in. Much better than talking about Proverbs’ pictures is looking at them. Much better than asserting the book’s shape is finding it in the text. And much better than theorizing about wisdom is listening to wisdom as God speaks in his **inspired** word. Looking and listening, we will indeed hear God’s voice and see his Son shining through the book of Proverbs.

1. MEETING WISDOM

This first chapter introduces us to Proverbs' wisdom. Part One sets this wisdom in its layers of context and begins to dig into the book's prologue (Proverbs **1:1-7***). Part Two further explores the prologue, summing up what we can learn about this wisdom from the start. Proverbs' winding opening lines draw us in to the treasures—and the riddles—of this book.

Wisdom: The Larger Context

It is good to know that all human beings need wisdom. Not one of us is alone in reaching out for insight into common experiences such as getting along with our neighbors, or handling our money, or deciding whether and whom to marry. Chatting with a friend this morning, I needed wisdom on whether or not to reopen a subject of conversation—one that in my opinion had not reached good resolution between us. I'm still not sure whether I should have raised the matter again, which I did! But I *am* sure that I am not the only one who struggles to measure my words rightly.

The need for wisdom is a universal one. I'm writing these words in Jakarta, Indonesia. Just this afternoon, while waiting for a coffee at a local bookstore/coffee shop, I perused the nearest bookshelf of paperbacks offered in English. The first one that caught my eye was by a Japanese writer offering the secret to a long and happy life. There was a book on the Danish way to live well, and one by a French author on how to live better and longer. A little American gift book was all about happiness and how to achieve it. Here was a whole world of aspiring

* All Proverbs verse references being looked at in each chapter part are in **bold**.

wisdom writers, in a little Indonesian coffee shop! How desperately we humans reach out for wisdom, all over the globe.

Centuries ago, God's people living in the kingdom of Israel also knew this universal need for wisdom. They knew it partly because many nations around them in the ancient world had a special class of wisdom speakers and writers, often serving as advisors to kings. The Bible itself gives us clues: the book of Esther, for example, tells of the Persian king's "wise men who knew the times" (Esther 1:13)—although those wise men were anything but wise. The wisdom of Solomon that we find in Proverbs was known not only in Israel: "Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt ... and people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom" (1 Kings 4:30, 34).

Egypt in particular was renowned for its wisdom literature, of which a good number of ancient texts remain in evidence. Many **commentators** note the similarities of some of these texts to various aspects of the book of Proverbs. The Egyptians also used the form of father-son instructions that we see in Proverbs. Even more specific parallels can be found between sections of Proverbs 22 – 24 and the Egyptian *Instructions of Amenemope* (see Wilson, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, page 4). As it turned out, my experience in the Indonesian shop was not a new thing! From all directions in Old Testament times—Egypt, Arabia, Babylon, Phoenicia—came voices offering insight into the concrete experiences of human life.

Solomon's Wisdom: Alike and Different

Why did Solomon's wisdom stand out? Many of the surrounding nations might not have known how to answer that question. In general, the people in those nations did not acknowledge the Lord God of the Scriptures, the One Creator God by whose **common grace** they were able to gain some insight into how his world works and how we can best live in it. Solomon was blessed to be part of the people

who directly received God's revelation of himself—and through whom that revelation was offered to the world, ultimately through the Lord Jesus. We should note that the content of Proverbs was not all written by Solomon; certain sections of the book are attributed to other wise men. But the great majority of the sayings are indeed attributed to him, and the book's introduction points to him directly, as we will see.

Scripture itself highlights and explains Solomon's distinctive wisdom: "God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore" (1 Kings 4:29). God had spoken to King Solomon in a dream and invited him to make a request of God. Solomon humbly asked for wisdom—for "an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil" (1 Kings 3:9). His request was granted: "Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you" (1 Kings 3:12). Solomon's wisdom, then, was insight like that of the peoples around, but it was different: it was *God-given* insight into how to live in God's world.

We understand the distinctiveness of Proverbs today in how we receive it: as part of a whole God-breathed revelation given to us in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. The Bible's wisdom books give inspired insight into the concrete experiences of human life in a world created and ruled by the Lord God of the Scriptures. It is a world created perfectly but which then fell, through human rebellion against the Creator. What mercy, that the Creator did not turn away and leave his creation in darkness without him. What grace, that the Creator had an eternal plan of redemption, through the Lord Jesus Christ who would come into this world and through whom God would **redeem** a people for himself from all the nations.

In Proverbs we break into the story of redemption revealed by God in his word. The biblical context is clear in the prologue, which introduces us to the wisdom offered in this book. The very first verse tells us the very first thing we need to know.