

Proverbs 1:1-7: Proverbs as Wisdom

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- [0 : 0 0] their attention to that. Feeling better about that test? Yeah, we're getting into it. Appreciate it. Thank you, Stephen. I want to begin by playing a mental game with you for a moment.
- I'm going to create a scenario and I'd like you to conjure up something in your mind. Let's say that you were suddenly placed in charge of the country.
- Quite a stunning accomplishment we've just bestowed upon you. And then we asked you to declare your highest priority.
- What would come to mind? What is the first thing that comes to mind? Now, let's make it a little easier. Of course, the executive branch is given primarily to the national defense.
- So let's take that off the table. You're in charge. What comes next? Top priority. Have you got it in your mind?
- [1 : 1 5] There are two that continue to rise in the contemporary discussion. Was it jobs? Or, more broadly stated, the economy?
- Was it education? The economy and education often, and not only in our particular climate, but throughout the decades, really, rise as priority number one.
- But what happens if we put a different stake in the ground? Consider this. What if you made our nation's pursuit of wisdom your number one priority?
- Anybody here think of wisdom first? Think about it. We're better off wise than merely well-educated, because cognitive intellectual knowledge alone does not always translate into a person knowing how to live or what to do.
- Think about it. We're better off wise as opposed to even being wealthy. And, of course, wealth or economic opportunity is the end which is often behind the priority of education.
- [2 : 3 5] For we all know people who are economically well-off, but not necessarily understanding the first thing about living well. Ironically, then, the things that we often pursue as highest priorities can still, as important as they are, leave us as a people falling short.
- But think of this. If we gave ourselves to the pursuit of wisdom, two things would follow, at least.
- First, you would be certain of gaining a good education. You can't have wisdom without knowledge.
- But, secondly, you would have a decent shot at being economically advantaged. For such is the teaching of wisdom literature to provide skills that set someone on their way.
- The pursuit of wisdom. Number one goal. Interestingly, the University of Chicago has recently committed \$2 million and 24 young scholars to the endeavor called Defining Wisdom Research Network, whose webpage presence states, quote, It is difficult to imagine a subject whose exploration holds greater promise in shedding light and in opening up creative possibilities for human flourishing.
- [4 : 2 2] And I agree. The pursuit of wisdom. Very few subjects open up greater possibilities to human flourishing.

So, this summer, we are going to join that pursuit. In this case, I would say that what is good for the country would be good for the church.

Wisdom. Number one goal. And for that, we are going to take our summer series into and through this book of Proverbs.

For there certainly is no other book in the Bible where wisdom has this preeminence of place. Even in the reading today, seven verses, six times throughout, we've already heard the word wisdom or to be wise.

Now, today's message, then, is an introduction. I'm actually not going to expound Proverbs 1, 1-7. We will expound it next week.

[5 : 29] And so, you might say, if you've been here for 12 1/2 years, this is maybe the third time in 12 1/2 years that I have preached without necessarily trying to just expound a particular text in front of me because I want us to have a broader ranging understanding that kind of undergirds what will be 10 expositions through Proverbs throughout the course of the summer.

So, this is by intention and design an introduction, not an exposition. And it's an introduction on two fronts. I want to introduce to us wisdom as literature.

A couple of things I want to say about that that I think will help us all summer long. And then I want to introduce to us the book of Proverbs as a wisdom book.

So, let's take this first heading, Wisdom as Literature. And I want to say first, that Wisdom as Literature is an ancient art form.

Take the word ancient. This kind of literature that we'll be reading that we find in Proverbs was around 1,000 years before Proverbs.

[6 : 51] In other words, the book of Proverbs must be placed within an ancient umbrella of wise sayings and manuscripts for all the way back into Mesopotamia, Egypt, 1,000 years before the writing of Proverbs.

Documents like this are emerging. And even after Proverbs, as you get into Greece and the height of its Athenian aspiration, the wise teachers emerge.

And there are lots of documents related to wisdom literature. So, wisdom is ancient. In fact, the pursuit of it and the importance of it, I think, go all the way back to the beginning of creation.

Turn back in your text, and I encourage you to grab one. It'll help you in the heat of the hour. Genesis chapter 3. For the very first time that a human question arises on the pages of Scripture that required a sermon, it did in some level deal with the nature and importance of wisdom.

I'll just pick it up in chapter 3, verse 4. But the serpent said to the woman, You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

[8 : 30] So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

Humanity from the very beginning in the pursuit of wisdom. And there's a great key lesson in that early moment in humanity's history that I think informs the entire umbrella of this ancient literature known as wisdom.

And it's this. The lesson is this. No wisdom will be had when humanity turns away from life lived out in the fear of God's Word.

That's what Adam and Eve did. They began to pursue wisdom outside of the context of being related to God and His Word.

And so wisdom literature by nature, Christian literature like Job or Proverbs or Ecclesiastes or any wisdom literature that's found in the ancient world is in some sense trying to put humanity on its feet again in a world that is confused and fallen and broken and relationally distorted and people have begun to apply their minds to ways that would, in a sense, give us equilibrium where we might know how to live well.

[10 : 23] You want to live the good life? The high life? I love those ads. Wisdom is different than the Miller ads, of course, but, well, not necessarily to be equated.

We should at least say this. But do you want to live the good life? Well, wisdom will, of necessity, be acquired by you. And what we learn throughout all of humanity is that no wisdom will be had where there is a lack of the fear of the Lord.

That's what happened to Adam and Eve. That's what happens to you and me. We pursue to live life well outside of being related to God and it all, it all falls apart.

And wisdom literature is trying to put that back together. That's why, at the introduction of the preamble of the book that we will be studying, it says, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge for fools despise wisdom.

It's also an art form. I said it's an ancient art form. You're going to love Proverbs. They come to you most often by way of comparison.

[11 : 44] If you love words, you'll love the summer series. I think of Thomas Cahill in his book *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. He has this ancient kind of 13th century Irish monk up in the middle of the night hunting words, the correct word, the very word needed to communicate truth as he watches his cat named Pangurban hunt mice.

And he says, Ah, my cat, Pangurban, and I, we sit alone at night hunting. He hunts mice, but I hunt words. And when you think of Proverbs, it's an art form.

It all turns so often on the use of one word. So what you're going to see in this kind of literature is wisdom is like this by way of comparison.

we're going to see that it also is put forward by way of contrast. The wise person is like this but the fool is like that.

And in one statement, maybe seven, eight, nine words, a lifetime of mature thought and practice can emerge from that because of the choice of words.

[13 : 10] There are times where this literature in its art form is put forward by way of consequence. If this, then you will reap that. So are the sayings of the wise.

I've grown in my appreciation for wisdom literature and Proverbs particularly because of the ability of the writers to work so well with words.

I think of the preeminent lyricist of our day, Bob Dylan. He is fortunately the lyricist of our generation. And he was asked, where will the next great lyricist emerge from?

By the way, I think one of the Jonas brothers, this upcoming upstart generation, has said that Dylan either doesn't know how to sing well or doesn't write well, so we should put the Jonas brothers aside for quite some time.

and return to the greater, well okay, you're smiling, some of you, that's good. He was asked, where will the next great lyricist come from?

[14 : 20] And do you know where he said? He said, he or she will probably emerge from the rap culture, the hip-hop culture, because they work so hard with words.

They have to frame something in a very lyrical way with a minimal use of words. I think there's probably something to that. If you like music, in other words, the craft over the turning of a phrase, you will like the book of Proverbs.

If you like words, you will like the book of Proverbs, because it is in ancient art form. Let me move on. I want to say something else about wisdom as literature.

This literature anticipates the gospel. There's an early moment in Jesus' life where Luke is keen to place him within the context of wisdom.

Take a look. Luke chapter 2. The birth narratives. On two occasions, we have these interesting summaries.

[15 : 38] Luke chapter 2 verse 40, And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

Take a look down the column to verse 52. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

The genre of wisdom, or Proverbs in particular, I think, must be read and undergirded by this fact that it is anticipating Jesus who is filled with wisdom, who himself is the wise teacher, and in whom the gospel, we find the very wisdom of God.

So Proverbs, I think, has this anticipatory force to it. As I believe all wisdom literature must find its end in Jesus.

Let me put it this way. Jesus is the gateway to wisdom. Well, he says as much.

[16 : 59] Turn over to Matthew, this great concluding crescendo to the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5-7, we're familiar with his teachings, and when he concludes, he wants you to place all of wisdom as literature under his domain.

Verse 24 of chapter 7 in Matthew, 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 the rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on the rock.

And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man and already one can begin to hear Proverbs 1 through 9 where the lady wisdom is upheld and lady folly is upheld and there are two ways to go in life and wisdom and folly are crying in the streets for people to follow them.

And Jesus says if you want to be the wise one, hear my word and do them. for the fool ignores my word and does never put it into practice.

In fact, he says the foolish man built his house on the sand and the rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell and great was the fall of it.

[18 : 37] Two things I want to say about this. Jesus is now utilizing the art form of wisdom literature and he's not only utilizing it, he demonstrates himself to be the preeminent wise teacher and beyond that, he elevates his word as the gateway for wisdom.

Whoever hears these words of mine and does them. Now these are two then wonderful lessons that we're already seeing before we even begin the book of Proverbs.

First, it's an ancient art form whose pursuit goes back to the beginning of time and we realize we will have no wisdom if we do not fear the Lord, if we try to find it outside of being related to him.

In other words, wisdom is not merely a principle for living. It can only be an evidence in one who is properly, rightly, related to God. And then Jesus comes along and says, yes, it is my way.

Follow me. Fearing God. Being faithful to Jesus. Understanding that all final wisdom rests in the gospel and in him is key as we look through this series together.

[20 : 14] Let me follow it up then with just a couple of words. If you are seeking today to be a wise person, to live well, this summer is for you.

Whether you've explored Christianity or the claims of Jesus, we consider him the gateway to your pursuit, the entrance point.

So he's worth exploring. And the content, interestingly, the content of the gospel is also described in the New Testament as wisdom.

Take a look at 1 Corinthians. It's that moment, of course, in Paul's literature where he most dramatically, by way of contrast, speaks of the gospel of Christ and his death as the wisdom of God in contradiction to any other wisdom, any other way forward that doesn't recognize we are properly related to God before we can live well in this world.

chapter 1, verse 18 of 1 Corinthians, for the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning, I will thwart.

[21 : 42] Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has God, not God, made foolish the wisdom of the world?

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. for the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

For consider your calling, brothers, not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth, but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world even things that are not to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom. The content of the gospel, the death and resurrection of Christ, is the wisdom of God as Paul explains in Ephesians because the mystery that has been revealed in Christ is that God through him is bringing all things back together under him.

[23 : 25] So Jesus is the one appointed by God to properly restore all relationship that went awry when we pursued wisdom outside of his word.

So Jesus sage, and I don't mean the spice, the content of the gospel, our salvation, the anointed one himself, God's reigning king.

You want wisdom? Fear the Lord. Lord. How do I fear the Lord? Place yourself under the wisdom of God in Christ and his word, and he will rightly restore you to God and then give you the skills necessary to live in a world that's out of sorts.

Wisdom is literature, an ancient art form that anticipates the gospel. But let me say a few things about Proverbs as a wisdom book.

First, I want to tell you, if you turn back to Proverbs 1, that it's an anthology. Now, you might not know what an anthology is, but an anthology simply is a gathering together of sayings under a particular subject.

[25 : 08] It's a collection. And the book of Proverbs is a collection of sayings about wisdom. It's an anthology, and beyond that, it's an anthology of anthologies.

This is very interesting to me, and it will help us over the course of the summer. Often when you read Proverbs, because every proverb is its own literary unit, you just think these things are just strung along like pearls, or they just fall like raindrops, and there's no way to hold the whole book together.

But actually, there are, in my opinion, seven collections of sayings within this book, and it's structured that way.

I want you to see it today, because over the course of the summer, our ten expositions, we're going to do four expositions in what is really the first collection.

And then we're going to do one exposition in each of the other collections, so that by the end of the summer, we have been exposed to this anthology of anthologies.

[26 : 20] One, one, I think, is the title for the whole book. One, two to seven, which we will have expounded next week, is the preamble.

And then you have this, hear my son, your father's instructions in verse 8, and that collection of wisdom sayings goes, turn the pages over, all the way through 918.

Find yourself to 918, where the way of wisdom and the way of folly have come full circle, the first collection as a whole. But in verse 1 of chapter 10, you realize that we are now in another collection.

This one's called the Proverbs of Solomon. And that collection runs all the way through, turn your pages over, through 22 and verse 16.

And we know that the break is here because in 22, 17 to 19, there's a renewed preamble, almost a repetition of how the whole book began.

[27 : 30] But the key, of course, is verses 20 and 21 of chapter 22. Have I not written for you 30 sayings of counsel and knowledge? And what's interesting is when you begin to follow after that point in the book, there are 30 sayings that come to an end.

So 22, 17, all the way through 24, 22, is the collection of 30 sayings on wisdom. And then take a look at 24, 23.

There's another heading we've run into now. A fourth collection. These also are the sayings of the wise. And that's a very short collection because at 25, 1, the fifth collection starts.

Look at 25, 1. These also are the Proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, copied. So evidently there were a host of other sayings that didn't go with the Proverbs of Solomon in chapter 1, but that they found hidden in some closet somewhere.

And the scribes began to record them at the time of Hezekiah, and that whole grouping has been dumped in here, cut and pasted in. That goes through chapter 29, which of course then leads the final two collections.

[28 : 57] Chapter 30, verse 1, we have one that begins, these are the words of Agur, son of Jekeh, the oracle. And then chapter 31, the words of King Lemuel.

Seven collections. Some think the woman who fears the Lord at the end stands on its own. I think it really mirrors the preamble of the whole.

It's an acrostic that takes you through the Hebrew alphabet. In other words, this is grammar 101. But Proverbs as a wisdom book, know that it is an anthology.

Secondly, know that it comes with an intended audience. Who's the audience of the book? It comes under one word, really, all throughout, son.

What do we make of this? We'll take a look at chapter 1, verse 8. Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching.

[30 : 07] 2-1, my son, if you receive my words. 3-1, my son, do not forget my teaching. 4-1, hear, O sons, a father's instruction. And this is wonderful because it almost sounds like the Proverbs in this first section which are coming under the name of Solomon have their weight under the teaching of David.

For in 4-3, he says, when I was a son, with my father tendered, the only one in the sight of my mother, he taught me and said to me, let your heart hold fast my words, keep my commandments and live, get wisdom.

who's the audience? Well, in the literary perspective, it's a teaching of a father to a son. In the corpus of the canon, who is God's son?

Israel throughout. And the Hebrew children would have read Proverbs as part of their scriptures and would have seen that from a very early point throughout, Israel is referred to as God's son.

Hosea 11 1 actually saying that out of Egypt, I called my son in reference to Israel. So who is the audience? The Lord's family, Israel, God's son.

[31 : 28] I also want to say that the audience is everyone who wants to find wisdom. I think of Paul's words to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3 14, he says devote yourself to the scriptures that you learned from your youth.

Those are the Hebrew scriptures, Proverbs included. For they will make you what? Wise unto salvation. That these scriptures are for everyone who wants wisdom, who wants to be rightly related to God and acquiring the skills that will enable them to live well in a complex world that left off with the fear of the Lord.

It's also, I think, for future leaders. There are times in Proverbs throughout where all the instructions are from kings to the sons of kings.

It's a manual on discipleship. It's a book for future leaders. It's a training manual on how to grow up and live well, knowing God and relating socially with others with the skills that will be required, which is why one of the Proverbs says, hey, when you sit in the presence of the king, be careful how you eat.

Well, who's he writing to? Who's the audience? Well, who gets to sit in the presence of the king? Foreign kings. Well, it's the sons of the kings. It's the future leaders within the imperial court.

[33 : 09] And so Proverbs has this breadth of audience. God's family, Israel, his son, future leaders who will serve in this world, and everyone, you and me, who want to live well.

Well, let me end, bring it to a close. Proverbs as a wisdom book, I've mentioned it's an anthology. It's for an intended audience that includes us.

And I just want you to know that it has great practical aims. The book of Proverbs is for life on the street.

Things that when put into practice will enable you to relate well in all kinds of circumstances.

Let me put it this way. The aim of the book is to impart the needed life skills that will equip you to live wisely in this world.

[34 : 18] Further, the aim of the book is to introduce you to the necessity of being in a right relationship with God if wise living is to be your goal.

So we're off. We're running. We're wanting to know the ways of wisdom. May God bless us this summer as we seek it together.

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word and we look forward to this for we need it. Priority number one. Help us to view this book as a summer swimming hole that will be refreshing to our souls.

And I pray that the words even spoken today would elevate Jesus and educate us to live well under him for the many things needed in his name.

Amen.