

A Month in Proverbs



Individual Reading Plan

Individual Reading Plan - A Month in Proverbs

This plan for reading Proverbs contains an essay by Joanna Adams (reused with her permission) that provides a perspective on Biblical Wisdom and how Proverbs can give us real insight into how to be wise by maintaining a God-centered world view. It's followed by a 31 day reading guide (a chapter a day) and further references to dig deeper into Proverbs should you choose to.

At the end of your reading each day it's a great idea to pray with your bible open about what you've read and how to best apply biblical wisdom in your own life.

What is Biblical Wisdom?

An introduction to Proverbs

By Joanna Adams

I am excited to help you get into wisdom literature, with a focus on Proverbs, because it can be part of the Bible we find hard to engage deeply with. Looking at Proverbs on the surface level it can appear to be a mere compilation of recommendations for a good life, with some cryptic sayings and images scattered throughout. Some things are obviously applicable to our lives, while others seem to be contradicted by our experiences, and still others completely disconnected from us. But as I spent more time in Proverbs, I was increasingly delighted by the treasures of wisdom laid out in this book, especially in foundational ideas it reveals about what wisdom is and how we find it. So, what does Proverbs have to teach us about wisdom?

Proverbs and Wisdom

As Christians, wisdom is something we deeply desire. Living out our faith day by day in all our decisions, large and small, in the midst of a world pulling us in so many different directions and a vast array of voices clamouring for our attention, is something that definitely requires wisdom that only God can provide. And while on first glance Proverbs can sound like generic advice for good living, in reality it flows from an utterly God-centred worldview. In wisdom literature we don't find historical narratives of God interacting with and rescuing His people. We don't find records of His law or His word spoken through prophets. Instead, we are encouraged to wrestle with the world around us and with our own experiences within the framework of God's Sovereign Wisdom revealed in His creation and through the teaching of those who are submitting their lives under that Sovereignty.

Tim Keller vividly described how Proverbs functions in the Bible;

“If the Bible were a medicine cabinet, Psalms would be the ointment put on inflamed skin to calm and heal it. Proverbs would be more like smelling salts to startle you into alertness.”

“Proverbs is not a set of “simple steps to a happy life” for quick consumption. A proverb is a poetic art form that instills wisdom as you wrestle with it.”

[Tim Keller, “The Way of Wisdom; A Year of Daily Devotionals in the Book of Proverbs.”]

Keller helps us to appreciate that the book of Proverbs has its own unique place in the Bible, and with that a unique way for us to engage with it. So, to help us understand biblical wisdom and how to approach the book of Proverbs, I am going to outline four key concepts derived from chapters 1 and 8 of Proverbs. We live in the midst of pressures from the world around us and from our sinful desires within us. We need wisdom to live a godly life. So what does Proverbs have to say about the nature of wisdom?

1. THE FEAR OF THE LORD IS THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

The first passage I want to touch on is Proverbs 1:1-7, which states the purpose of the book:

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

²for gaining wisdom and instruction;

for understanding words of insight;

³for receiving instruction in prudent behaviour,

doing what is right and just and fair;

⁴for giving prudence to those who are simple,

knowledge and discretion to the young—

⁵let the wise listen and add to their learning,

and let the discerning get guidance—

⁶for understanding proverbs and parables,

the sayings and riddles of the wise.

⁷The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

From this passage we get the key verse, a verse which unlocks the whole book and the idea of what biblical wisdom is all about. Did you see this in verse 7?

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” Later on in chapter 9 we get the perhaps more familiar phrasing: *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”*.

So this is our first important lens through which to understand wisdom in Proverbs. This is not a wisdom that is all about intellect and intelligence. It is a wisdom that starts with a relationship, a right ordering of ourselves in relationship with God. The fear of the Lord is where it starts. Without humbling ourselves before our Maker, and understanding that He is Sovereign and we are not, we cannot be truly wise. We may have a worldly wisdom based on our own achievements, being “wise in our own eyes”, but Proverbs is very harsh on that kind of wisdom: “Do you see a person wise in their own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for them” (Proverbs 26:12). If we want to construct wisdom from our own perspective and priorities we will not taste the wisdom that comes from heaven. If you think about Proverbs (and life) as a movie or a novel, you are not the main character. God is.

Our culture is littered with invitations to be the main character of our own lives. With our intrinsic love of narrative and storytelling, I can see the appeal. But as Christians our grand narrative doesn't revolve around us; it revolves around Jesus. This takes us right back to the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve did not trust that the command of God was good for them, they could not see how it was good and did not trust that God was Sovereign and worthy of their obedience. This is where sin came into the world; they were “wise in their own eyes.” They chose to be their own main character, instead of fearing the Lord.

I saw a really clear lived-out example of this in Rachel Gilson's amazing book *“Born again this way”* (if you haven't read it yet, please do give it a read - I can't recommend it highly enough). Rachel became a Christian during her time as a student at Yale, having already embraced an identity as a gay woman. The more she read the Bible and came to understand God's design for sex and marriage, the more she saw that sex between women was not included in that design. She couldn't yet see the goodness of the the command for sex only in a marriage between a man and a woman. But she didn't ignore the command, because she was beginning to understand the goodness and love of Jesus and that He was worth trusting in. Her journey of wisdom began with a right relationship with God through Jesus.

So Proverbs gives it to us straight - you can't even begin to grow in wisdom without first humbling yourself under the right Lordship of God. If you don't start there, everything you try to grow in will be centred on your own self-centred idea of wisdom and will therefore be out of kilter with God's built in order for the world He has made, and for the people He has set out to redeem. If God is the source of true wisdom, we cannot be truly wise without Him.

From this crucial starting point, there is another foundation I want to point out from Proverbs 1:1-7, which takes us to our second helpful lens through which to approach Proverbs.

2. WISDOM IS BOTH A GIFT AND A TASK

The second part of verse 7 gives us another clue about biblical knowledge; "*The fear of the Lord is **the beginning of knowledge.***" I found this combination of the "gift and the task" in Graeme Goldsworthy's book on Proverbs, "*The Tree of Life; Reading Proverbs Today.*" Goldsworthy insightfully captures the fact that wisdom is a journey, it is something to grow in and learn and work on. The fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of our journey in wisdom. If we start with that rightly-ordered mindset of God as Sovereign Lord over our lives, and as the source of true wisdom, then we can grow in our own wisdom as we read God's Word and seek to live it out. It is available to us if we look for it! One of the purposes of the book is stated in 1:4, "*for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young*", which means that these proverbs aren't just for the mature, for the sages who have spent their lives poring over wisdom texts, for the intellectual and lofty. These are also for those who are young or immature and still have so much to learn and experience.

So wisdom is something that everyone can gain! Later, in Proverbs chapter 9, wisdom is personified as Lady Wisdom and issues an invitation; "'Let all who are simple come in here!' She says to those who lack judgement." (Proverbs 9:4). Throughout Proverbs you see the folly of fools frequently condemned and warned against.

But being a fool isn't about being simple or immature - being a fool is about ignoring God's wisdom, it's about not fearing the Lord. We all need to come to God with

humility, with the spirit of a child, and from there (as we saw in the first point) we can grow in wisdom as we listen, as we experience life and make choices within the framework of right relationship with God.

This prologue points us to the educational purpose of the book - it is something we are meant to read to help us to grow in wisdom. So wisdom is not something that descends upon us fully formed. It's a gift from God that we have the joy and challenge of working at as we listen to His Word and seek to apply it in our hearts and actions.

3. WISDOM INVOLVES CREATION

The next passage that helps us to understand the wisdom of Proverbs is Proverbs chapter 8. In this chapter wisdom is personified as Lady Wisdom, who was with God and used by God in the creation of the world. Here's an excerpt from verses 27-31:

*"I was there when he set the heavens in place,
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
²⁸ when he established the clouds above
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
²⁹ when he gave the sea its boundary
so the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.
³⁰ Then I was constantly at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
³¹ rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind."*

Chapter 8 depicts the intimate connection between wisdom and creation, and this is really helpful in understanding the book of Proverbs as a whole. Wisdom is about observing the world around us and living in a wise way in relation to it. There is a good order inbuilt into creation - God made the world with wisdom constantly by his side, and wisdom rejoices in the way He has made the world with a good and ordered design. This also means that wisdom isn't isolated to particular spheres of

life. All of life comes under the umbrella of wisdom, because God made the whole world with wisdom and made humans to live well within it. For example, the woman of Proverbs 31 exhibits wisdom in every aspect of life, her own character, her household, and her business management.

This helps to make sense of how people who don't know God are able to do amazing and often very wise looking things in the world He has made.

That is, *“unbelievers can understand the way creation works and even use that knowledge for the benefit of humanity.”*

[Richard P. Belcher Jr, “Finding Favour in the Sight of God; A theology of wisdom literature.”]

This is what the idea of common grace captures - that people can tap into the way God has made things, and choose to contribute order within that, but of course they can also choose to contribute chaos. A composer can tap into the good order as they understand the way harmony and musical structure works, what is pleasing to our ears and also what is painful, and use that to create something utterly beautiful and emotionally moving without having a personal belief in God. Their music may even move others to lift their hearts to God, even though it was not the composer's original purpose!

Of course there is tension in this because of the fall; humans bring disorder into the ordered creation because of sin, and there is also the groaning of creation, which has been subjected to decay until Jesus' return (Romans 8). But, in wisdom literature we see that how we live in all of life matters. There is no sacred/secular divide. Our actions in the world can either contribute order or disorder, we can bring creativity and goodness into bear on the world around us, or we can bring chaos and discord. Keeping this wisdom and creation relationship in mind throughout Proverbs is very helpful to understand the contents of the book, which deals with all different facets of life in this world and how we interact with creation for good or ill, order or chaos.

(It is helpful here to briefly note that this is where holding Proverbs together with the other wisdom books is helpful: in Proverbs we often see the world operating as is probable, but not assured in every circumstance because of human sin and its impact

on creation. Other books such as Ecclesiastes and Job deal with the order of things not operating as we would expect.)

4. THE TWO WAYS TO LIVE OF WISDOM

Finally, wisdom offers its own version of two ways to live: the way of folly and the way of wisdom. Lady wisdom offers an invitation at the end of chapter 8 in verses 33-36: “hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it...for whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from the Lord, but he who fails to find me injures himself; all who hate me love death.” Throughout Proverbs we are constantly seeing what these two ways look like and what they ultimately lead to: full life or destruction.

From these four lenses, a definition of the wisdom of Proverbs can be formulated:

Godly wisdom must start with being in right relationship with the Lord; and then works itself out into the entirety of our lives as we seek to grow in responding rightly to the world around us under God.

Choosing the way of wisdom ultimately leads to full life, while ignoring it and choosing folly (life lived on our own terms rather than God’s) ultimately leads to destruction.

We have established some foundational ideas from Proverbs and what it says about biblical wisdom. This has helped me to be able to wrestle with the book of Proverbs within a framework of understanding what wisdom actually is and what it means for my relationship with God. There are many specific literary aspects and tools within Proverbs that I could go into (perhaps there will be a part two!) but to close this article I want to make some points about how Proverbs points us to Jesus.

PROVERBS AND JESUS

Biblical theology is all about how the Bible is one big story that points to and is fulfilled in Jesus. Growing up, I was always excited to discover ways that Old Testament passages ultimately point to Jesus, but this can be a bit less obvious in wisdom literature and it wasn’t something I had thought a lot about before. Here

(briefly!) is how Jesus embodies and completes the four wisdom literature concepts I laid above.

1. JESUS IS THE ULTIMATE WISE PERSON

In fulfilment of Proverbs 1:7, we see that Jesus is the ultimate wise person because He is the only to ever have been in perfect relationship with God and to have obeyed Him perfectly. We see this so much in the gospel of John, as Jesus constantly references His Father and how all that He says and does is from Him, for example, “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.” (John 5:19). And He makes the way for us to be wise, because through Jesus we too can be in right relationship with God. There is no other way to grow in godly wisdom.

2. JESUS IS THE ULTIMATE WISE TEACHER

Jesus is the ultimate wise teacher and authority. He taught in parables and sayings, like wisdom literature, but He also taught as one with authority, not as the other teachers of the law (Mark 1:21-22; 1:27). The Jewish sages and teachers pointed to all the other wise sayings of the fathers; Jesus fulfilled them and spoke with the authority of God (Hebrews 1:1). As we listen to Him we receive the gift of being made right with God, being sanctified, and we can grow in this as we follow Him, becoming more and more like Him and being who we truly are in Christ. Sanctification, like wisdom, is both a gift and task! Given by grace but also for us to work on each day in all the choices we make and the way relate to the world around us.

3. JESUS IS AT THE CENTRE OF CREATION

In John 1 we read of the Word of God, Jesus, who was with Him in the beginning, and through whom all things were made (John 1:1, 3). This idea recurs in Colossians 1:15-20, which takes it even further - not only were all things made through Jesus, but He is the one who will bring all things into reconciliation with God. Jesus is the source of creation, which was created with the good design and ordering of God, and He will bring everything back into proper order through His death, resurrection and return. This is what we look forward to in the New Creation, and it is only possible through Jesus, the wisdom of God; “For by him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or

authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16-17).

4. JESUS IS THE EMBODIMENT OF GOD’S WISDOM WHO DEMANDS OUR RESPONSE

This is the two ways to live of godly wisdom, which points to Jesus and how we respond to Him. Jesus shows this in His wisdom teaching, in the parable of the wise and foolish builders. The life built on the sand ultimately leads to destruction, whereas the life built on the rock leads to lasting life. Life built on Christ is what lasts. All through the gospels we see people responding to Jesus, either in faith or disbelief. Jesus is the true embodiment of God’s wisdom, and how we respond to Him matters for eternity; without Him we cannot be truly wise, because without Him we cannot be in right relationship with the God who made us. Unless we abide in Jesus we cannot bear fruit (John 14); we cannot grow in wisdom and in living godly lives that please God.

To conclude, the wisdom of Proverbs isn’t generic advice to live a good life. Despite its apparent similarity to contemporary wisdom texts of the Egyptians and Babylonians, it is very much centred in God and it doesn’t hold up without Him. It is also, as is the entire Old Testament, pointing us to Jesus! So the next time you give reading Proverbs a go, don’t be afraid of wrestling with all these pithy and provocative sayings. Growing in wisdom is something that is possible for all those who have come into right relationship with God through trust in Jesus. We can answer Lady Wisdom’s call and come through her door to grow in the wisdom given to us by God.

Proverbs Reading Guide

Day	Reading	Complete
1	Proverbs Chapter 1	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	Proverbs Chapter 2	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	Proverbs Chapter 3	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	Proverbs Chapter 4	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	Proverbs Chapter 5	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	Proverbs Chapter 6	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	Proverbs Chapter 7	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	Proverbs Chapter 8	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	Proverbs Chapter 9	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	Proverbs Chapter 10	<input type="checkbox"/>
11	Proverbs Chapter 11	<input type="checkbox"/>
12	Proverbs Chapter 12	<input type="checkbox"/>
13	Proverbs Chapter 13	<input type="checkbox"/>
14	Proverbs Chapter 14	<input type="checkbox"/>
15	Proverbs Chapter 15	<input type="checkbox"/>
16	Proverbs Chapter 16	<input type="checkbox"/>
17	Proverbs Chapter 17	<input type="checkbox"/>
18	Proverbs Chapter 18	<input type="checkbox"/>
19	Proverbs Chapter 19	<input type="checkbox"/>
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26	Proverbs Chapter 26	<input type="checkbox"/>
27	Proverbs Chapter 27	<input type="checkbox"/>
28	Proverbs Chapter 28	<input type="checkbox"/>
29	Proverbs Chapter 29	<input type="checkbox"/>
30	Proverbs Chapter 30	<input type="checkbox"/>
31	Proverbs Chapter 31	<input type="checkbox"/>

Resources for Further Reading

“Finding Favour in the Sight of God; a theology of wisdom literature” by Richard P. Belcher Jr

“The Tree of Life; Reading Proverbs Today” by Graeme Goldsworthy

“Gospel and Wisdom” by Graeme Goldsworthy

“The Way of Wisdom; a year of daily devotions in the book of Proverbs” by Tim Keller