

## Proverbs (March 3)

### Reading Proverbs

Clinking bits of silver, shouting merchants, and bleating herds distract a young man as he passes through the streets of Jerusalem. He pauses to wonder at the piles of goods on display, bartered wildly by shoppers and shopkeepers. At the corner, he catches a whiff of myrrh and cinnamon from where a sultry woman caresses the doorframe of her house. She winks and smiles. From the city gate, the young man hears the voice of one calling, “The Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Proverbs 2:6).

Above the clamor of Jerusalem’s streets, King Solomon could see and reflect on the temptations of his subjects – temptations to which he himself succumbed. He saw clearly the need for instruction, for wisdom that parents could pass on to their children and teachers could share with their students. The book of Proverbs is the result of Solomon’s God-given wisdom, experience, and concern.

### Authors

Although the book begins with a title ascribing the proverbs to Solomon, it is clear from later chapters that he was not the only author of the book. Most of the book, however, is closely linked with Solomon. A group of wise men or scribes compiled most of the proverbs as editors and added chapters 25-29 to the earlier collections. The book also contains a short prologue and a longer epilogue which may have been added to the other materials. The emphasis on the “fear of the Lord” throughout the book ties the various segments together.

### Wisdom Literature

The Jews sometimes speak of the Old Testament as the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Included within the third division are Psalms and wisdom materials such as Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. These wisdom books are associated with a class of people called “wise men” or “sages” who are listed with priests and prophets as an important force in Israelite society. Some of their writings, like Proverbs, were optimistic, as they showed the young how to behave in order to live prosperous and happy lives. Other materials, such as Job and Ecclesiastes, were more pessimistic as they wrestled with difficult philosophical and theological questions such as the problem of evil and the prosperity of the wicked. Both viewpoints – the optimistic and the pessimistic – are also found in the literature of other nations in the ancient Near East.

Because of the nature of Proverbs, we must not interpret it as prophecy or its statements about certain effects and results as promises. For instance, Proverbs 10:27 says that the years of the wicked are cut short, while the righteous live long and prosperous lives. The righteous have abundant food, but the wicked will go hungry. While such verses are generally true, there are enough exceptions to indicate that sometimes the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. Normally the righteous and the wicked receive their due on earth, but at other times reward and punishment lie beyond the grave.

Although Proverbs is more practical than theological, God’s work as Creator is especially highlighted. Twice God is called the Maker of the poor. He also directs the steps of man, and his eyes observe all his actions. God is sovereign over the kings of the earth, and all history moves forward under his control.

### Blessings for Readers

As you read Proverbs, bear in mind the central theme of the book: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 1:7). Proverbs promises that you will not face life alone or without good counsel. When you face the practical dilemmas of life, the Lord is with you to establish your steps. Call on his name, and wisdom will answer. “You are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30).