

Wisdom for Today's Decisions

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But the path of the
righteous is like the
light of dawn, that
shines brighter and
brighter . . .

—Proverbs 4:18

A Fresh Look at Proverbs

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Dedication



I am thankful for the support and encouragement of my wife and the patience of my three daughters (for sharing the computer with me). I am also thankful to the scores of dedicated and fascinating Christian men and women who have attended my Sunday school class over the past 13 years for sharing their insights and beneficial dialogues with me. Most of all, I dedicate this work to the loving Father we all share, who orchestrated the bringing of all these people together.

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Preface



*T*his is not a pretty work. It contains repetition and frequently jumps from concept to concept.

This book was not written for any particular age range. It is intended for serious disciples of any age.

Structurally, the work may be labeled as a commentary. However, the purpose of the book is devotional. It was written with the intention of helping Christian readers see connections between Proverbs and the whole of biblical scripture.

Above all, it is intended to challenge the reader to apply God's principles to every aspect of life.

It is the author's hope that you will truly find wisdom for all of your decisions and that you will learn what it truly means to fear the Lord, to walk in His ways, and to fall ever more deeply in love with Him.

Proverbs 1



1:1 The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel:

*K*nowing the author lends credibility to the text. The authorship is clear and undisputed for chapters 1–22:16 (see also 1 Chronicles 28:9, 2 Chronicles 1, and 1 Kings 3:9–11). Chapter 30 is attributed to Agur and chapter 31 to King Lemuel. We know very little about either man. All we really know is what we can glean from the internal evidence within these two chapters.

Proverbs 25:1 states, “These also are proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah . . . transcribed.” All we can really know from this statement is that some portions of the book of Proverbs were compiled after Solomon’s death.

Some scholars believe the phrase “Hear the words of the wise” from Proverbs 22:17 provides additional internal authorship evidence. However, I have seen no adequate evidence to believe such a reference implies an author other than Solomon himself. Other than chapters 30 and 31, I attribute the entire book to Solomon himself.

Wisdom for Today's Decisions

1:2–6 To know wisdom and instruction, to discern the sayings of understanding, to receive instruction in wise behavior, righteousness, justice and equity; to give prudence to the naive, to the youth knowledge and discretion, a wise man will hear and increase in learning and a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel, to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles.

The purpose of Proverbs is outlined here. How do we assess and judge things? By what principles shall we live? There is something for everyone, regardless of age, maturity, or intellectual ability. Proverbs has something for each of us!

Sometimes we think that only “smart” people can be wise, or perhaps we assume that smart people *are* wise. The wisdom spoken of here in Proverbs is not restricted to mental capacity or intelligence. In fact, smart and intelligent people can (and often do) behave foolishly, while mentally challenged individuals may behave and make decisions that demonstrate great wisdom. Moral wisdom trumps mental intelligence when it comes to living a godly life. Wisdom is available to all, but certainly not all will hear her voice. While you read through Proverbs, the question to simply ask yourself is: Will you hear and heed her voice? In other words, are you open to change and growth?

As we continue through the book of Proverbs, you will become aware of a deeper purpose not specifically mentioned in the above list (although it could be argued that the word *righteousness* covers what I am about to suggest). The ultimate purpose of Proverbs is to enable us to walk with God and to live out the two great commandments to love God and to love men.

1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

“Fear [yir’ah in Hebrew] of the LORD” is the key to understanding Proverbs. Yir’ah seems to be a combination of fear, reverence, awe, and total awareness of His presence.

Genuine fear of God ultimately allows us to perceive the power and capabilities of God. Having a state of mind full of fear, we understand clearly that He can and will do as He says. He is faithful in His promises, but His promises include judgment. However, this in turn helps us establish a firm foundation for faith and trust in God. We know He is trustworthy. That is why we fear Him. But it is also why we can trust Him. He alone is worthy of our fear, as Jesus expounded in Matthew 10:26–33.

Fear of God causes us to come to grips with our relationship with God. Fear of God allows real faith in God to blossom because it allows you to cast out *all other fears*. Try the following experiment. Read the paragraph, then close your eyes and try to visualize this encounter with God Almighty.

Imagine God. Now imagine Him seated on a great throne. You are attempting to see His face, but the brilliance is blinding. You hear the words, “Come closer, My child”—but fear grips your heart. You remember an unkind word you said. You remember a time in which you were a poor witness and when you had a bad attitude. Again you hear the thunder: “Come closer, My child.”

To the right-hand side of the throne there is a movement, and the shadow of a figure crosses your eye, enabling you to stop blinking. Now you can stare more carefully than before. You stumble forward and utter the words, “Holy, holy, holy, O Lord God Almighty, forgive me.”

Thunder rumbles again and you hear, “Be still, My child, your sins have already been covered and forgiven.”

This exercise illustrates to a small and imperfect degree what fear of God *feels* like. Fear of God is a total awareness of the *reality* of God, and it is an attitude that encompasses our entire being. Our acute awareness of God and the state of mental and spiritual readiness it produces allows us to begin to grasp knowledge.

By contrast, fools despise this entire idea, because they don’t value wisdom and knowledge, or having a deep relationship with God.

1:8–9 Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and do not forsake your mother's teaching; Indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head, and ornaments about your neck.

How do you honor your father and mother? Listen to them. Fathers and mothers are not infallible, but they have your best interests at heart. We shall see many comments about the fifth commandment elucidated throughout Proverbs.

Keep in mind that these verses precede the passage about peer pressure and sin. There is a learning hierarchy that Solomon is teaching us. Learn from God first and from parents second. Later he will add the voice of wisdom and also counselors (or advisors) to this list. The basic principle is to be open and ready to receive instruction.

1:10 My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent.

The two verbs to consider here are *entice* and *consent*. Both speak to the freedom of one's will. Sinners desire others to sin along with them. In Genesis 4:7 God warned Cain, saying, "Sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it."

Moral dilemmas exist at all stages of our lives, from early childhood through old age. We live in a world full of temptations. Even before the fall of Adam, choice and temptation were real. If choice were *not* to exist, then God would have developed a robotic, deterministic system.

Actually, there are many people who believe we *do* live in a deterministic setting. Extreme behaviorists (such as B. F. Skinner) believe that people act only from conditioned responses, and in essence, therefore, do not really choose. Some who believe in fate, karma, or chance may believe that choice is just an illusion. Even some radical ultra-Calvinists use language suggesting we have no control or free will at all.

Proverbs is full of advice. The whole point of advice is that people can take the advice and use it to improve their lives, because we do

have freedom concerning our will. While it is beneficial for us to wrestle with and find a balance between the concepts of free will and the sovereignty of God, the simple thrust of this verse is “Do not consent.” Choose to choose wisely.

1:11–14 If they say, “Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood, let us ambush the innocent without cause; Let us swallow them alive like Sheol, even whole, as those who go down to the pit; We shall find all kinds of precious wealth, we shall fill our houses with spoil; Throw in your lot with us, we shall all have one purse,”

In order to demonstrate the principle of self-control, Solomon presents a hypothetical situation. It has been suggested by some that the most powerful word in the English language is the word *we*. The world knows how powerful this is. The simple phrase “Come with us” brings a flood of emotions and thoughts. If I don’t go, will I miss out—or worse, will I forever be excluded in the future? Will I be mocked? If I am not “one of them,” perhaps they will turn on me and attack me in the future.

A spectrum from desire to fear plays on our will at vulnerable times. In such times confusion reigns rather than wisdom. When the final argument of easy wealth appears, it is difficult to argue against. The *future* and any potential consequences may become forgotten in a hazy mist of *present* self-centered concerns.

Maturity may be defined in part by future orientation. Individuals who are mature tend to look down the road and plan and prepare for possible future eventualities. Immature individuals tend to live only in the present. Thus, when an immature person makes a choice, he often lacks the benefit of understanding the consequences of the decision.

1:15 My son, do not walk in the way with them. Keep your feet from their path.

This verse represents the second primary theme of Proverbs chapters 1–9. First, we are to fear the Lord, and second, we should watch carefully the path upon which we tread. We shall see as we continue through Proverbs that there is God's way or there are other paths. All paths except God's path eventually lead to destruction. The Hindu idea that all paths lead to the top of the mountain is simply not biblical. If you are a fatalist, the book of Proverbs will drive you crazy.

1:16–19 For their feet run to evil, and they hasten to shed blood. Indeed, it is useless to spread the net in the eyes of any bird; but they lie in wait for their own blood; they ambush their own lives. So are the ways of everyone who gains by violence; it takes away the life of its possessors.

These verses illustrate the principle of reciprocity. Stated concisely, what you reap is what you sow. This passage implies that evil individuals are blinded by their own corruption. In a sense, they are more bird-brained than real birds. At least a real bird will avoid a snare it has witnessed being laid. But these individuals lay their own snares for themselves.

This passage also illustrates another common biblical theme, "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

1:20–21 Wisdom shouts in the street, She lifts her voice in the square; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the gates in the city, she utters her sayings:

Wisdom is shouting, will you listen? The main point here is that wisdom can be found anywhere if we have an attitude of openness to hear it.

1:22 How long, O naive ones, will you love simplicity? And scoffers delight themselves in scoffing, and fools hate knowledge?

Three causes for *not* listening to wisdom's voice are suggested here: 1) being naïve; 2) having the attitude of a scoffer; and 3) simply hating knowledge.

Being naïve is defined for us as loving simplicity. The word *simplicity* here can also be translated as *foolishness*. This is the immature person who is just not ready to learn.

The primary motivation for a scoffer (as revealed in this verse) is humor. This is the class-clown type of person. This individual attempts to see the funny side of everything. He takes delight in poking fun at everything.

The third type of nonlearner is the fool who simply hates to learn anything. Perhaps he cannot understand how the knowledge will be used. Maybe the thought of learning smacks of work, and his overt laziness will not tolerate such a condition. Regardless of his internal motivation, he hates knowledge.

The interesting question that remains unanswered is the question of how long these people will refuse to learn. Educators understand that they cannot “learn” anyone. They can only teach.

The question to ask yourself is, are you ready to learn?

1:23 Turn to my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you.

This represents a conditional promise. If we listen *and* heed wisdom's reproof, then we will begin to attain it. Notice how important reproof is, or actually how important it is to be able to accept it. One of the hardest things to do in life is to embrace reproof. It is also one of the healthiest things we can do, as it is often the first step toward humility and needed change.

1:24–27 Because I called, and you refused; I stretched out my hand, and no one paid attention; And you neglected all my counsel, And did not want my reproof; I will even laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your dread comes, when your dread comes like a storm, and your calamity comes on like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come on you.

No man has an excuse. No one is able to claim that wisdom did not beckon him. It is interesting to note that the same is true regarding God Himself (see Romans 1:21–25).

The latter part of the passage deals with judgment. Solomon's father David pointed out a similar thought: "The wicked plots against the righteous . . . the LORD laughs at him; for He sees his day is coming" (Psalm 37:12–13).

1:28–32 Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; They will seek me diligently, but they shall not find me, because they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the LORD. They would not accept my counsel, they spurned all my reproof. So they shall eat of the fruit of their own way, and be satiated with their own devices. For the waywardness of the naive shall kill them, and the complacency of fools shall destroy them.

This passage deals with hypocrisy. We cannot find true wisdom on our own terms. We cannot hate knowledge, refuse to fear God, neglect counsel, disregard reproof, and then "pretend" to seek wisdom and find it.

There is a very close connection between Solomon's concept of wisdom and the theological concept of salvation. In regard to salvation, God will always offer grace to each of us. But in regard to natural consequences, a price must be paid for wayward behavior. To be *wayward* means to be off the path or way, and this always leads to trials, problems, or destruction that would have been otherwise unnecessary.

1:33 But he who listens to me shall live securely, and shall be at ease from the dread of evil.

Those of us who listen have no need of worry, for our peace rests in God. The promise of judgment is intended to bring about the healthy fear of the Lord and begin the learning process. Here the promise of security and blessing and peace should make us all grateful to God.

Proverbs 2



2:1 My son, if you will receive my sayings, and treasure my commandments within you,

Throughout the book of Proverbs the theme of obeying commandments is repeated and expanded upon. Often people think of the word *obey* as a word that implies dos and don'ts and regulations. What Christianity actually teaches is that we “treasure” the commandments. Obedience then becomes joyful and we discover that real freedom and abundance of life comes through this process.

Solomon is clearly the author here, but how are we to understand the phrase “My son”? One explanation is that these words were written specifically to an actual son such as Rehoboam. Another possibility is that Solomon penned these words of his wisdom poem as if they were the actual words of God Himself addressed to all His children, which we can all read specifically as His “son.” I leave such debates to others, but I believe that all scripture can be profitable for each of us and that the applications apply to each of us. I therefore feel safe in exhorting any reader to treasure the commands of God.

2:2–5 Make your ear attentive to wisdom, incline your heart to understanding; for if you cry for discernment, lift your voice for understanding; if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will discern the fear of the LORD, and discover the knowledge of God.

Do we just leave this issue of wisdom up to God? No, we must take an active role. Our role in the process of acquiring wisdom includes active listening, heartfelt desire for it, prayer, the active seeking of it, and valuing it above wealth.

Here Solomon repeats the primary theme of fearing the Lord, which is what the quest for wisdom is all about. Notice also how God utilizes the “discovery” method of learning. When God in His supernaturalness breaks through into what for us is “natural,” we observe a miracle. Often we see Him teaching in the Bible through miracles and through spokespeople who have received a direct (i.e., miraculous) message. But even more often He uses the discovery method. Jesus used this with His parables, and when John the Baptist asked, “Are you the coming one?” Jesus replied in a manner that implied John should observe the signs and come to a proper conclusion based on these signs (Matthew 11:2–6). By doing this, John could discover the truth for himself.

2:6–8 For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding. He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; He is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice, and He preserves the way of His godly ones.

God is the ultimate source of all wisdom. It is not *nature*, as some propose, lest we worship the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1). Notice as you read these verses how intimately the concept of peace and divine preservation are tied into the concept of wisdom. In difficult times, Romans 8:28 may not seem to be in full operation, but if we maintain a godly perspective, eventually we will see how powerful our “blessed hope” truly is! As

John recorded, “He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with me on My throne” (Revelation 3:21).

Consider the phrase “He preserves the way of His godly ones.” The “way” is the path toward God. Solomon is going to continue to develop this theme of the “way” so that we may understand both His role and our role in the covenant. In Proverbs, wisdom involves walking on the “way.”

2:9 Then you will discern righteousness and justice and equity and every good course.

To begin to see as God sees is one of the greatest blessings He can grant us. As wisdom becomes more and more a part of us, what is it that we focus on? Let us compare this verse to Paul’s exhortation: “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things” (Philippians 4:8). This verse represents a beautiful promise of discernment and guidance.

2:10 For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;

In addition to receiving salvation and being changed forever *positionally* in our relationship to God, as we accept Him we are changed *internally* as well. Paul said that we are “new creatures” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Unlike a fool (see Psalm 14:1), knowledge becomes pleasant to us.

2:11 Discretion will guard you, understanding will watch over you,

God will continue to watch over us, but as we draw near to Him and allow Him to impart godly attributes to us (such as righteousness and wisdom, etc.), we should begin to make better choices. Thus our own discretion (which we actually acquired from Him) will guard us.

2:12–15 To deliver you from the way of evil, from the man who speaks perverse things; from those who leave the paths of uprightness, to walk in the ways of darkness; who delight in doing evil, and rejoice in the perversity of evil; whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways;

This passage points out the extremely *practical* reasons for accepting the path of wisdom. Not only will this path lead to salvation for our souls, but even while we are here on earth we may receive deliverance from many forms of evil.

2:16 To deliver you from the strange woman, from the adulteress who flatters with her words;

Wisdom can deliver you from sexual troubles if you listen to her “voice.” Another point of advice is this: beware of flattery. Flattery always contains hidden motives.

2:17–18 That leaves the companion of her youth, and forgets the covenant of God; for her house sinks down to death, and her tracks lead to the dead;

The metaphorical “adulterous woman” is a *type*. This is the person who believes in personal happiness above commitment. The illustration points out that she does not commit to man or God. Her path leads to death, and often those around her (i.e., “her house”) must also suffer because of her choices. Our current society has even developed language to mollify the grieving conscience of individuals who struggle with self-centered behavior. Popular psychology often states things such as the following: “You should be happy . . . don’t feel sorry for other people, they knew what they were doing . . . you can’t be bound by vows you made 10 years ago . . . you have a right to be happy. Your happiness is more important than _____.” These worldly-wise platitudes and others can be seen nightly on nearly any situation comedy, and

they reflect the social climate of our times. Proverbs reveals the end result of such thinking and behavior.

2:19 None who go to her return again, nor do they reach the paths of life.

Furthermore, she takes those who go to her down the same path of death. One of the first things to learn about the different paths spoken of in the Bible is that while you may find yourself at a crossroads, you cannot be on two different paths at the same time. You may switch paths, but this act is a result of a willful choice rather than chance. 1 Corinthians 2:14–15 points out that “a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.”

2:20–22 So you will walk in the way of good men and keep to the paths of the righteous. For the upright will live in the land, and the blameless will remain in it; but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be uprooted from it.

The contrast here involves the metaphor of living or not living in the land. This is a reference to life and salvation. The means of getting to the Promised Land is by walking along The Way and keeping to the path of righteousness. The upright and blameless live and remain, but the wicked are “cut off.” Notice how the treacherous are pulled out, roots and all! They are removed both physically and spiritually!