

Part 1: Why Wisdom?

Tyler Velin | Proverbs 1:1-7

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Over the past few months we have worked through the letters of 1 and 2 Peter together and today we are starting a new series which is a perfect follow up to Peter's message to his churches.

Today we are starting a series in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs is part of a segment of literature in the Bible called "wisdom literature." It exists, as we will see today, to make one wise.

In a little bit we will look at what the Bible means when it talks about wisdom, but first I want to point out two reasons why Proverbs is a fitting study for us at this present moment.

First, the book of Proverbs is written for the 21st Century eye, but the eternal heart. Researchers are beginning to realize that the reading patterns we are developing today are a direct result of social media. We are learning to be skimmers of data. Our eyes are becoming functionally trained to identify points of structure and brevity. If there's any biblical style perfect for engaging this habit, it's the brief and punchy lines of Proverbs.

Perhaps you've heard these very tweetable ideas: "A cheerful heart is good medicine" (Prov. 17:22), "Pride comes before the fall" (Proverbs 16:18), "Spare the rod, spoil the child" (Proverbs 13:24), or "A friend loves at all times" (Proverbs 17:17).

These truths are easily packaged for what the modern eye wants and yet, unlike our media of today, it demands careful reflection. These proverbs call us to sit with them, to roll them around like a hard candy in our mouths, tasting, savoring and reflecting on their content. They are similar to the means of communication around us, but also distinct from them.

This leads to the second reason I'm excited for the book of Proverbs, it helps us live in a world of constant voices. Read with me **Proverbs 1:20-21**. We are tied to our phones, our screens, our 24/7 news outlets and the echoes of our own hearts. But in the face of all the noise, the voice of wisdom cries out to us in the book of Proverbs and offers help, comfort and peace.

If you have ever found yourselves pulled in a million directions, then hear the words of Proverbs. If you have ever felt out-paced and out-schemed in this world, consider the wisdom of God. If you have ever felt like a total and abject fool and you wonder if there is hope for you, then receive God's grace from the book of Proverbs.

That is because more than being a self-help book, this is a God's help book. This book depends upon the grace of the God who gave it to us not the intellect of the creatures he gave it to. This is in large part what we are going to see today in our introduction to the book of Proverbs.

The first nine chapters of Proverbs function as a prologue to the book as a whole. Our passage today is the prologue to the prologue. It's the teaser trailer to the feature film.

The big picture we are going to see today in Proverbs 1:1-7 is this: **The wisdom of God is eternal grace applied daily.**

We are going to unpack this by looking at three primary divisions in this text today. First we are going to see in verses 1-2, **An Introduction to Proverbs**, then in verses 3-6 we are going to look at **The Effects of Proverbs**, and lastly we are going to find really the main point in the book of Proverbs in verse 7 and that is **The Beginning of Wisdom**.

Let's start by looking at our first section today: **An Introduction to Proverbs**, and read with me if you will **Proverbs 1:1-2**.

Now technically the introduction to this portion includes only verse one, but I'm including verse two for the sake of the sermon today because together they create a whole picture of the book. Verse one tells us what it is we are reading and verse two tells us the purpose of what we are reading.

What are we reading? Well we are reading the proverbs of Solomon, the son of David, the King of Israel.

Proverbs, like the book of Psalms, doesn't have a single author. They are both collections of various authors and their writings which were assembled together as a whole unit. We will encounter proverbs written by some other men, but the book is made of primarily of, and begins with the proverbs of Solomon.

Why is this important? Because it was common for various cultures in this time to have their own sort of wisdom literature. Most famously Egypt had a collection of writing similar to Proverbs. But here we see that what is written here is not a generic self-help book on the shelves of Barnes and Nobel. This book is written by God's king. Unlike other parts of the Bible where we are reading the story of Israel or the story of Jesus, Proverbs doesn't include any narrative, but here the book is placed in the overarching story of scripture.

If you want the origin story for this book, look with me at **2 Chronicles 1:7-12**. You've often heard us say that God is not a genie, but here God acts almost as a genie and gives Solomon one wish. God had fulfilled all his promises to the nation of Israel to establish it but did you notice the humble need King Solomon had: "Who is wise enough to govern your people?" and he asks for wisdom.

God is so amazed at Solomon's request he gives him wisdom and riches. What's the point? Even King Solomon wasn't wise enough to lead God's people but God was and in his grace he gave Solomon wisdom and here in these Proverbs, God is actively passing that wisdom to you! God's kingdom produces not only wise kings, but wise citizens.

But what are proverbs? The Hebrew word for proverb is a poetic word that dictates a style of writing, but it simply means a saying specifically by similarity. The poetic mechanism of Proverbs is not a rhyme scheme, but the way in which the author presents similarity and contrast in his writing.

Consider this famous proverb: "You don't tug on superman's cape, you don't spit into the wind, you don't pull the mask of that old lone ranger, and you don't mess around with Jim."

How are we supposed to understand the point of the song? Well, the artist builds on similarity: You wouldn't do that to superman, so don't do it to Jim.

And there's the beauty of the Proverbs. None of us have ever met this Jim. But if any of us were to meet him we would know not to mess around with him because we know it would be similar to those other foolish decisions.

I heard one pastor say this stunning line about Proverbs. He made the point that "The world tells you to live and learn, but Proverbs tells you to learn and live." I remember hiking once with some friends when the trail split. I was first in line so I chose option one, and long story short, only a few steps in and I had almost fallen off a cliff. You know what all my wise friends did? They took trail two. That's what Proverbs do, they give you wisdom before you need it so that you might be spared the experience of pain and instead maximize your experience of the joy that comes in God's gracious wisdom.

So what are we reading when we read the Proverbs? The sayings of God's gracious revelation to his leaders. But what is the purpose of these sayings: **Proverbs 1:2**.

These proverbs are written to help us know what is wise and understand sound insight. If you really understand what God is wanting to do here, you can stumble into something pretty astounding. God is after more than obedience from his people. He's after their wisdom.

If the only metric you use when thinking on your day to day actions is: "Am I being disobedient," you might be shortchanging yourself on your own joy. God writes to actually make us wise. The Hebrew word for wisdom is "hoekma" and it expresses far more than smarts or common sense, it includes the idea of skill and excellence.

Look at how Moses described the artists and craftsmen who worked in Exodus: **Exodus 28:3**. The word used for skill and skillful are based on the root *hoekma*. In other words why should you care about what Proverbs is saying?

Because wisdom is not arbitrary riddles and Yoda speak. Wisdom is not something for the old and contemplative. Wisdom is not good observation. Wisdom is God's grace to have skill to live as his covenant people. Wisdom is the skill to live well. Don't you want to thrive in life like that?

God is offering it to you in wisdom, that's why verse three begins with the verb: receive it. Wisdom comes from God, and those who are wise receive it from him. In this book God is offering you one of the most practical gifts in this world, more precious than all the riches, and he's asking you to receive it.

What does this look like? Solomon now begins to show us. In verses 3-6 we see **The Effect of the Proverbs**. Why should you want what is in this book? See if any of these things sound attractive to you: **Proverbs 1:3-6**.

Now if you were listening carefully you may have heard and seen three key areas which are affected by wisdom. Wisdom influences society, wisdom supplements the simple and the young, and wisdom enlivens the wise and old.

We see the benefit to society [*wisdom benefits society*] in **Proverbs 1:3**. If we receive the instruction of God, which can also be translated the discipline of God, it will show up in our wise dealings, our righteousness, our commitment to justice and to fairness.

If you want to see a flourishing society, look to the kingdom God desires to build. God's wisdom makes us wise in our dealings with others not deceitful. God's wisdom gives us instruction on what is righteous and beneficial to others. God's wisdom helps us know true and pure justice, and God's wisdom helps us deal that out with equity and fairness.

Doesn't this sound like the culture our world wants? Look at **Deuteronomy 4:5-6**. God's wisdom applied in the lives of his people is attractive to outsiders. In God's kingdom wisdom is winsome! Now it's true that God's kingdom is not this world, but while the world cannot see God's kingdom, they can see God's kingdom people: the church. So a good point of application at this time is to examine the communities you are in, and ask yourself if these qualities show up in your life?

As we roll along in Proverbs we see how the fool is a burden to those around them, but the wise are a blessing. Godly wisdom shows up in community.

Secondly, this *wisdom supplements the simple and the young*: **Proverbs 1:4**.

Proverbs often talks of the simple man and while this isn't necessarily a derogatory term it does communicate an ordinary sense of life. A simple man is a man who isn't afforded a college education, one who realizes that he can't solve the metaphysical questions in life, who doesn't claim to know the solutions to our political quagmire.

And while the goal is always that the simple man grows, here we see how they grow. Though they be simple, God's wisdom gives them prudence. Another way you can translate it is: shrewdness. Though they be simple, they will not be taken advantage of.

Many of us in here might think ourselves to be the simple one. But here is the joy of God's wisdom. To follow Jesus well you don't need to become a systematic theologian (though theology helps!). To be wise the simple man only needs to do the hard work of taking this wisdom and relying on it for life.

Similarly the young by nature lack two things: experience and discretion, both tend to show themselves together.

This again shows why wisdom is so different than simply being right. I remember, as a young pastor and a young married man, I got a call on what was generally an off day to open up the church building as a family needed to look at it for a funeral.

I got the call and immediately told Sarah I needed to go, to which she innocently asked, "Right now is kind of an inconvenient time, is there another time you could do it." The truth was, there wasn't. It needed to be done. So what I should have said to her was: "There's actually not. It needs to happen now, can I help with something when I get back?"

That would have been not only right, but also wise. What I did say was, "Yeah, I'm sorry the death of their family member is inconvenient to you." While my answer may have rightly corresponded to reality, it lacked discretion, it was (as I immediately knew) unwise.

Those of us who are young in years of life, or young in years of faith here's the hope of wisdom, it makes up for our lack. So many of us think that the dangers presented in life are not true unless we ourselves

experience it first-hand, wisdom says, “Don’t be a fool.” So many of us can believe that we will never figure out what it looks like to follow Jesus well, but wisdom helps us.

But lastly, this **wisdom enlivens the old and wise: Proverbs 1:5-6.**

When one is older in age, or when one considers themselves wise in any particular area, you can be prone to believe two errors. Error one is that you have learned enough of God’s wisdom. Error two is that you have run your course and now you get to coast the rest of the way.

Wisdom corrects both of these.

Look back at the first two words of verses three and four. Why does Solomon give these proverbs? To receive instruction, and to give it to those who need it. The wise person takes wisdom and the wise person gives wisdom.

If you consider yourself to be wise either in experience with Jesus or years of life, wisdom reminds you of your purpose! It’s to turn towards those around you and to teach them to live with godly skill in their life as well. Wisdom is the promise on which discipleship rests.

You might not know everything, but if God has granted you wisdom in one area of your life, then you ought to share that with others. Everyone wants to think themselves wise, and that’s good, but to be wise is to look and examine where you are doing the work of helping others as well.

In this Solomon expresses the joy of wisdom: You’re never done learning!

Because God is the source of this wisdom, you’ll never exhaust it! Solomon says, hey Mr. Wise, keep learning! You still need guidance. The wise never think they’ve read God’s word enough. The wise return to God’s counsel again and again because they realize the never ending well of instruction God has for them. Ray Ortlund, reminds you who might be older to not die before you die.

This book is for the simple, this book is for the young, this book is for the old, this book is for the wise. Do you get the point that this book is for you!

But there’s a problem here isn’t there. Verse six describes the task of understanding this wisdom in four ways, all of which imply a sort of challenge. Look at it: **Proverbs 1:6.**

To do this we must understand words we don’t have, words that are hard to understand, and words that are like riddles, or enigmas and mysteries. In other words this task isn’t going to be easy!

So how do we do it?

Here Solomon gives us the catch phrase of the whole book. We know how powerful a slogan can be: Nike, “Just do it.” “Like a good neighbor, State Farm is there,” “There’s no wrong way to eat a Reese’s.”

And here at the end, Solomon teaches us how to solve this dilemma by providing a jingle which shapes everything we need to know about wisdom: **Proverbs 1:7.**

Here we have our final point: **The Beginning of Wisdom.**

Where does wisdom start? Wisdom starts, knowledge starts, societal change starts, prudence for the simple starts, experience for the youth, hope and purpose for the wise starts with the fear of the Lord.

Now even for believer's that's an odd phrase isn't it? But because we want what Solomon is selling we should take a minute to understand what he means when he says, "the fear of the Lord."

First, when he says the Lord, he is using the personal name of God in the Old Testament, Yahweh. Knowing lots of things doesn't make you wise. Being vaguely spiritual doesn't make you wise. It is your relationship to this covenant keeping God of the Bible which makes you wise.

If you miss this Lord, you miss all of it. Wisdom doesn't start with you. Wisdom didn't even start with the brains of Solomon. Wisdom, all skill for life, starts with the God who created the cosmos. But when sin came into the world through the foolishness of Adam and Eve, confusion came too.

You see, even Solomon who wrote the majority of this book eventually forgets to listen to his own wisdom and leads the kingdom of God into a train wreck. God's wise King Solomon wasn't strong enough to lead his people into this kind of wisdom.

But then God acted. In Luke 11:31, Jesus Christ, the King who was fully man and fully God said: "Someone greater than Solomon is here." We can look at every talking head and every book in this world to find wisdom, but the God who is all wise has chosen to put it in one place for us to see: **1 Corinthians 1:20-31.**

Where do we know God? In Jesus Christ. Jesus is the paradox of wisdom: sin promises joy but leads to death, salvation promises death to Christ but leads to joy. Your greatest problem is not that you are a fool. That's the symptom. The cause of foolishness is a relational rebellion against God only wise. Jesus brings us back.

So what does it mean to fear this God? There are all sorts of implications of this that will unfold as we go through this book but here it is meant to express a sincere reliance upon God as the source for all we need in life.

How do we know that's what Solomon is emphasizing? Because remember how Proverbs works? By comparison and contrast. Verse seven shows us what the fear of the Lord is by showing us what it isn't. **Proverbs 1:7.**

To not fear the Lord is to be a fool, and how do fools respond? They despise the wisdom and instruction of God. Remember how Peter spoke of the fools in his own day in 2 Peter 2:10, those fools, "despised authority."

What does it look like to be a fool? It is to reject God's authority and his instruction as daily essentials for life. It is to refuse to see your need for Jesus and to submit the whole of your life to him. It thinks we know best.

J.I. Packer points out the paradox of biblical wisdom to worldly wisdom. He says that worldly wisdom assumes that you can look out and know the things you need to know and keep one step ahead of them.

But then he says this about biblical wisdom: **"So far from the gift of wisdom consisting in the power to [know everything], the gift actually presupposes our conscious inability to [know everything]."**

The wise person knows they are incomplete and broken and turns to God in reliance for all of life.

My wife and I have started watching this reality TV show where people have to survive in the wilderness. Those survival experts all live in a reverent fear of the rivers. They know that that river is what provides them with fresh water and food. Their biggest fear is that the river would stop producing its bounty.

We need God's wisdom like a starving man needs fish from a river. But because of what Jesus does for us, we know that this fear is always met with God's endless provision: **Romans 8:32**. The fear of the Lord believers dearly that God doesn't withhold anything from us for live because he gave us his son so that we might now him more and more.

The late Charles Bridges says this about Proverbs: **We look into this Book, and, as by the aid of the microscope, we see the minuteness of our Christian obligations; that there is not a temper, a look, a word, a movement, the most important action of the day, the smallest relative duty, in which we do not either deface or adorn the image of our Lord, and the profession of his name.**

A slogan we use often here at Sovereign Hope is gospel change for all of life. If you want to experience that, you must realize that the way in which Jesus unites you to this God changes everything about your life. You cannot live without a constant reflection on the God who saved you.

And in closing I want to speak to those who feel like the fool. There are those of us in here how know you have actively chosen what is foolish. You've despised and rejected God, you haven't benefit those around you, you've been duped in your simplicity, foolish in your youth, and passive in your age. But here's the hope of a new beginning for you in Jesus.

The wonder of God's wisdom is this: the wise need to start in the same place as the fool. We all need to have a fearful reliance upon the God who set forth to save us in Jesus. It's my prayer that as we work though this book we see the joyful effect of this daily grace in all of our lives.