

Gleaners Bible Studies c 4

PICTURES FROM THE PROVERBS

Study 1

THE OBJECT IN VIEW



Proverbs chapter 1

The Book of Proverbs is a book of wise sayings: not simply an anthology or collection, but more like an oriental textbook, schooling young men in wise and right living by the repetition of wise thoughts. It has been said to offer a 'key to life', and certainly it deals very much with behaviour. The book itself belongs to a group of writings within the Bible, often referred to as 'Wisdom Literature.' Here in Proverbs this 'wisdom' is distilled into short, sharp phrases, dramatic contrasts and unforgettable scenes from life.

The basic question repeatedly considered is the difference between WISDOM and FOLLY. What is right and what is wrong is clearly set out, because 'wisdom' in Proverbs is based on reverence for God and obedience to His laws. The "*fear of the Lord*" is the essence of all true human wisdom. This is the starting point. (**Proverbs 1: 7**) Proverbs applies the principles of God's teaching to the whole of life; to relationships, home, justice, decisions, attitudes, reactions, everything man does and says and even thinks. God has taught what is best for man, and experience proves it!

Much of the original writing of the book is attributed to Solomon, although there are other proverbs than his contained in it. For example in **Proverbs 30: 1-33**, we find the words of Agur, and in **31: 1-9** those of King Lemuel. Generally speaking, Bible scholars agree that in content, the Proverbs belong to the days of Israel's first kings, although 'editing' seems to have continued for some centuries after. For example, King Hezekiah, who obviously organised some of the editorial work, (**see Proverbs 25: 1**) reigned 250 years after Solomon. But the book as we have it was finalised, at the latest, by about 200-180 B.C.

The precise part Solomon played in all of this is, of course, not known. His name appears in the title **Proverbs 1: 1** and he is the author/compiler of the two longest collections. (**Proverbs 10 :1 – 22: 16, and chapters 25 – 29**) Solomon was certainly a man of outstanding wisdom (**see 1 Kings 3 and 1 Kings 4: 29-34**), and his court became an international centre for the exchange of learning – a sort of ancient 'Open University'! **1 Kings 4: 32-34** tells us that Solomon, "*spoke three thousand proverbs, and his songs were one thousand and five. Also he spoke of trees... he spoke also of animals, of birds, and of creeping things, and of fish. And men of all nations, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom, came to hear the wisdom of Solomon.*" Through marriage with Pharaoh's daughter, Solomon had close links with Egypt, all ready renowned for its wise men. Solomon would undoubtedly have drawn on this wisdom too, but incorporated nothing in his writings that was not in line with God's standards.

It is important to bear in mind that the proverbs are by nature generalisations. That is, they state what is generally, not invariably, true. The writers do not deny that there are exceptions, but the exceptions do not come within the scope of these proverbial sayings. For example, Proverbs states that those who live by God's standards will prosper in the

world. While that is generally true, it is not an unqualified or guaranteed 'promise'. Job, and above all the life of the Lord Jesus, shows the other side of the coin.

THE BOOK DIVDES INTO EIGHT MAIN SECTIONS:

1. General introduction. 1: 1-7
2. Lessons on Wisdom. 1: 8-9: 18
In this section the 'teacher' addresses his pupils as a wise father would his son. The young man has a vital choice to make: between the right course and the wrong one; between wisdom and folly; between going God's way through life and going his own. The teacher describes the two alternatives and shows where each leads. The theme of every lesson is the same – 'Get wisdom'. (Repetition is still a good teaching method!) It is interesting while thinking of this passage, to notice that in **1 Corinthians 1: 24**, the Lord Jesus is called the "*Wisdom of God.*"
3. Proverbs of Solomon 10: 1-22: 16
4. Sayings of Wise Men 22: 17 – 24: 34
It seems likely that this section makes creative use of material from 'abroad', in addition to material from Israel's own 'wise men'.
5. Further Proverbs of Solomon 25: 1 – 29: 27
6. Words of Agur 30: 1-33
7. Words of King Lemuel 31: 1-9
8. In Praise of the Virtuous Woman 31: 10-31

This final section forms an acrostic poem on the perfect wife. There are a number of these acrostic poems in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms, in which the first letter of each verse follows the order of the 22 letter Hebrew alphabet.

It would be useful in your study to divide Proverbs into these sections, noting the outstanding ideas in each. Remember in all your study of God's Word that the basis of wisdom and knowledge is the "*fear of the Lord*". We need to be right with Him. You will notice that there are 31 chapters in the book. It would be helpful if you could read one chapter a day and thus spread your study evenly over the month. If, on the other hand, you can sit down quietly and read through the book in one sitting, so much the better!

For the rest of our study today we are going to look at those introductory verses in **Proverbs 1: 1-7**, as these are vital to our understanding of the purpose of Proverbs. **Verse 1** really forms the title to the whole book, not just this first section, as Solomon's own proverbs do not begin until **Proverbs 10: 1**.

1. The PURPOSE. Wisdom, in the Old Testament comes as the voice of reflection and experience, rather than of straightforward command or preaching. We are persuaded, even, teased, into seeing the connection between God's order in the world and His orders to men, and the sheer absurdity of going against the grain of His creation. This wisdom takes many forms, each designed to spur man into thinking about the meaning and purpose of life. A favourite goading device seems to be the vivid comparison, sometimes expanded into a parable. Others used are riddles, puzzling sayings, proverbs and even taunts. It is amazing how many people seem to amble through life without giving their very reason for existence, the slightest thought. You will probably have noticed on the radio or television when people's opinions are being sought about important issues in life, there is always someone who will say, 'I don't know!' or 'I've never really thought about it!' Proverbs is a collection of 'tools'. If you like, each with the purpose of pricking a person into thought. At the deeper

level too, there will be the searching reflection on the way God governs the world, and on the ends for which men live. In these opening verses of **chapter 1**, there are five reasons given for writing these proverbs:

a) To KNOW wisdom and instruction. It is essential for us to get to know the right things. We can spend a lot of time learning things which, in the light of eternity, are worthless. **'Wisdom and instruction'** are worthwhile. Learn those things which lead you to know God, the source of wisdom, in a deeper way. Compare **John 17: 3** and **1 Corinthians 2: 12**.

b) To PERCEIVE the words of understanding. We need to be able to tell the difference between good and evil: between values that help, and those that spoil our lives. Many words in this book will help us to do that.

c) To RECEIVE instruction. Training can only be given to those who are willing to listen to words of wisdom. Are you willing to receive God's words? Notice how important it is to hear wisdom's cry, **Proverbs 1: 20-30**.

d) To GIVE. There are many things that Solomon learned by experience that he wanted to pass on to other men. He did not want them to make the same mistakes that he had made.

e) To UNDERSTAND a proverb. Knowledge acquired, purely for its own sake, has little worth, and usually leads to the possessor of it becoming 'puffed up'. God wants us not only to hear His Word and know it, but to understand and DO His will. (**See Luke 11: 28 and James 1: 25**) This is the way to spiritual blessing. This is true WISDOM.

2. THE BASIS. The **"fear of the Lord"**. (**verse 7**) This is an important recurring phrase in Proverbs. Although it may not occur as frequently as some other words and phrases, this is no secondary theme. As the very basis of all wisdom, it is absolutely fundamental to the whole book. It describes a wholesome awe and respect for God which expresses itself in obedience, reliance on God and deliberate avoidance of evil. (**3: 7**) Watch out, for the other occurrences of this phrase, in **chapters 2,8,9,10,14,15,16,19,22,23, and 24**. Sometimes it occurs more than once.

Study 2

"My Son..."



Proverbs 2: 1 - 3: 10

A study of this theme alone, should prove very profitable for you.

All the way through the Book of Proverbs there are many references to a father and his son. This gives a very warm tone to much that is said. Nothing is more wonderful in family life than a loving understanding between a father and his son. We can see the perfect example of this in the Lord Jesus, as His Father's only Son. Jesus said that He spoke only those things He had heard from His Father, (**John 12: 49**) and it is most revealing to notice the things Jesus said about His Father.

"A wise son makes a glad father". (10: 1) It is almost as if Solomon is thinking aloud here. Perhaps he had caused his father sorrow by behaving foolishly. There have been many fathers whose lives have been saddened because of their foolish sons. In **Chapter 4: 3-4**, he recalls that he was a son to his father. It is obvious here that he was conscious of being loved by both his parents, who only wanted the best for him, so he remembers his father's advice. How carefully David would have taught Solomon the ways of God. Solomon never forgot the sound advice that he had been given, and so in teaching others, he adopts the way of a father passing on instruction to the son he loves. This helps to make easy reading for us and is acceptable teaching.

You will notice in Chapters 1 to 9 that the phrase "my son" occurs a number of times. We are going to study some

of them in this lesson. The instruction is very simple but extremely practical. Let us be sure we apply it to our lives.

1. Proverbs 1: 8 "My son, hear the instruction of your father". Just a simple call to listen. You can hear a father of today echoing almost the same words, can't you? 'Son, just listen to me for a moment!' The wise words of a godly father are worth listening to. How tragic, if we miss the value of wise counsel because we are either too busy or too careless to listen. How often the modern rebellious youth has been heard to burst out with, 'Huh, grown-ups! They think they know everything! But they don't understand!' Remember what we said in our last lesson? 'Wisdom is the voice of reflection and experience.' The wise father only wants to spare his son from making the mistakes he made. It doesn't cost the son anything just to listen; in fact it could save him much sorrow and difficulty. The same can be said too for the mother/daughter relationship. As children of God, we begin our training by listening to His Word and taking heed.

2. Proverbs 1: 10. "My son, if sinners entice you. Do not consent." A wise son will listen to instruction. This is necessary because it is obvious that other voices clamour for attention. Perhaps Solomon was thinking of his own youth when he wrote this. It could well be that instead of listening to his father's voice; he had allowed wrong influences to lead him astray. You will find, especially in your younger days, that there will be those who will try and suggest to you some other way to take than the best. Here in these verses, the 'sinners' are unprincipled people. They are set on doing terrible things and try to entice others to go that way too. Beware of any temptation which would take you out of the way of following the Lord. The Lord Jesus said that His sheep did not listen to the voice of strangers **John 10: 4-5**. They knew the Shepherd's voice. It is worth noticing in Proverbs, two influences which the wise must avoid at all costs. One is the perverse or evil man, the other is the strange woman. **Chapter 5: 3-23**, and **Chapter 7** tells us vividly of the strange woman with her impure devices to trap young men. Sadly, we are told of Solomon, that at the end of his life he loved many strange women. No wonder he warned his "son" not to traffic with the enticement of sinners!

3. Proverbs 2: 1. "My son, if you receive my words, and treasure my commands within you..." These words, from **2: 1** are quite wonderful. We can no doubt, all remember times in our younger days when we were promised a reward if we did those things we were told to do. Often the rewards were quite trivial, but they were designed as incentives to obedience. Here, in a fatherly way, the son who will receive and treasure the words of wisdom is promised rewards that are truly worthwhile. Notice that there must be earnest application to the instruction that is given. **Verse 4** sees the whole exercise as seeking after silver or hidden treasure. To achieve success is to find the **"fear of the Lord"** and the **"knowledge of God"**. (**2: 5**) Notice again, in **2: 9-10**, the qualities that follow, **"righteousness and justice"** and **"every good path"**. All these qualities enrich our lives. They are sadly lacking in so many lives today. Obedience to the words of the Lord Jesus will make them possible in us.

4. Proverbs 3: 11. "My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor detest His correction." In every family there must be discipline. If David was a good father to Solomon, there would have been times of correction for him. Lawlessness is damaging to our characters, so Solomon now passes on this advice and thinks of the way the Lord treats them who He truly loves. When correction is needed, He will give it. A good father doesn't correct his child because he hates him, but because he loves him. And he knows that to allow the child to continue in his own self-determined way will lead to disaster. Correction is for the child's own good. Sometimes as Christians, we shall find that God allows difficulties and possibly suffering to come into our lives. Why does he do this? Sometimes it is because we have gone astray, so He 'chastises' us to bring us back

again. He does it because He loves us – only because of this. See **Hebrews 12: 6** and **Revelation 3: 19**. Good advice then is given to us here in Proverbs, “Do not despise, or treat lightly, the chastening or correction of the Lord.” It is allowed in order to form in us, a character that is really worthwhile!

Here then are the four “father-son” relationships which give us good, sound advice. They show us true wisdom and could make all the difference to our lives. Make a note of any others that you find in the course of your study.

Study 3

The Claims of Wisdom

Read

Proverbs chapter 8

No study of Proverbs could be completely satisfying without a close look at chapter 8. Here you will find some wonderful picture-language used in order to display, not only the excellence of wisdom, but its claims upon our lives. Notice especially how it is PERSONIFIED. By this we mean that, although wisdom is a quality, it is presented as if it were a person, in this case a woman.

In marked contrast to the sly woman of **chapter 7**, slipping out at dusk to catch her man, wisdom makes an open appeal to all men, as they go about their daily business. The chapter opens with the picture of wisdom crying out. Like a town-crier, or herald. (**verse 1**) Her appeal to men is on the basis that she is straight and true. “*Listen; for I will speak of excellent things*”, (**8: 6**) and again, “*my mouth will speak truth*”. (**8: 7**) We shall look more closely at some of these things later, especially when we come to **chapter 8: 22-31**. These verses form a kind of poem which has to do with the origin and revelation of WISDOM. There is only one person who really fills this picture – it is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. We are going to divide the chapter into five sections, each of which will give us a different picture of WISDOM.

1. WISDOM'S APPROACH - (8: 1-5)

Wisdom cries out; at the various places where people would be found, her voice was heard. Like the town-criers of old, who went into the market-places of cities and towns, shouting out the news for all to hear, so wisdom is pictured at the gates and doors, making her voice heard. She wants all men to hear and listen to her message, especially the young. These verses show that when God speaks He makes sure that men can hear. It reminds us of the time when the Lord Jesus brought His wonderful message to the people of His day. He stood where they could hear and His words were as good news from a far country – from Heaven. (See **Proverbs 25: 25**)

2. WISDOM'S ADDRESS – (8: 6-13)

“*Listen; for I will speak of excellent things*”. (**verse 6**) We can sum up this section by saying that wisdom offers those things that are EXCELLENT and those things that are RIGHT. What more could be offered? Silver, gold and rubies are not in the same class as that which wisdom offers – the value of HER instruction is beyond any earthly fortune. “*All the things one may desire cannot be compared with her*”. (**8: 11**) In the standards that it sets “*all the words of my mouth are righteousness; nothing crooked or perverse is in them*”. (**8: 8**) Think carefully about this. Time and again in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, people found blessing from His words. There was a beauty about them as they set out God's standards for a happy and holy life.

3. WISDOM'S ACTIVITIES – (8: 14-21)

In these verses wisdom is pictured as full of power, exerting tremendous influence. **Verses 14-16** link it with governments. The world has always lacked wise rulers. Think of all the sadness and sorrow, anarchy and strife in the world because of the lack of capable rulers. How much our rulers need wisdom. No wonder Paul exhorts us to pray “*for kings, and all who are*

in authority”. (**1 Timothy 2: 1-2**) “*By me kings reign and rulers decree justice*”. (**8: 15**) Perhaps Solomon remembered the time when God gave him the choice of anything he desired. ‘The world was his oyster’ – ‘The sky the limit!’ But Solomon, the king, asked for wisdom that he might rule God's people well. God gave him this, and so much more besides, because of the wisdom of his choice. Wisdom leads to more wisdom and thence to power. Yet not only power, - “*I love those who love me, and those who seek me early, (or diligently) will find me*”. (**8: 17**) There is so much in these words! Begin life, as Solomon did, by seeking wisdom from the Lord. You will find God's love as well! You will also find wisdom's wealth, (**8: 18-19**), and you will be able to walk in wisdom's path. (**8: 20**)

4. WISDOM'S ASSOCIATION – (8: 22-31)

These verses are very important so read them carefully. Then compare them with **John 1: 1-18**. Especially notice the time factor, “*At the beginning ... before His works of old*”. (**8: 22**) This goes back before the origin of anything and everything. It links up with **Genesis 1: 1** and **John 1: 1**. Wisdom here is found “*established from everlasting, from the beginning, before there was ever an earth*”. (**8: 23**) Look at **8: 27**, “*When He prepared the heavens, I was there*”, and in (**8: 30**), “*I was daily His delight*”. These verses present a picture to us of that which is everlasting. Without any doubt at all, this speaks to us of the wonderful fact that the Lord Jesus is the eternal Wisdom of God. He is the One in whom God delights. Then **verse 31** ends by telling us that His delight or pleasure was with the sons of men. It may be that this chapter has never meant much to you before, but there is so much beauty in it that leads us to Christ, and this is good.

5. WISDOM'S APPEAL – (8: 32-36)

We close our study today with a plan and a promise from wisdom, and in them we can hear God's voice calling us to hear Him. There are blessings to be gained by hearing and keeping the instructions given. Notice in **8: 34** the need for daily WATCHING and WAITING. Do you spend time each day in prayer, not only speaking to God, but listening to Him through His Word speaking to you? We shall find true wisdom for all the decisions we have to make, if we treat God and His Word in this way. Life and favour from the Lord come through finding true wisdom. (**8: 35**) The greatest disfavour we can do to our souls – the very depths of our being – is to turn away from these precious and important things.

Study 4

The Fool and his Ways

Read

Proverbs 18: 1-7 and 26: 1-2

All the way through the Book of Proverbs you will read of the foolish. Up to the beginning of chapter 10, the young man has been faced with the choice and urged to choose wisdom. From **Proverbs 10: 1** onwards the instruction begins; practical instruction that ranged over every aspect of life.

In this first collection of Solomon's sayings (**up to 22: 16**), the sayings get their ‘punch’ from contrast. The second line, or half, of each saying is the direct opposite of the first. In a book in which the main theme is wisdom, you would expect to find its opposite described. But here Solomon often does this purely to emphasise the worth of wisdom – by contrasting it with foolishness. In Solomon's second collection of sayings (**Chapters 25-29**), the proverbs rely more on comparison than contrast for their effect. But both these methods serve to make clear, one important point. Wisdom is not merely intellectual ability and great knowledge. It has behind it the thought of soundness of mind, pure thinking, godly understanding and even the value of pure common sense. Look, by way of illustration, at one of the many verses in Proverbs which brings out the value of wisdom by contrasting it with foolishness.

Proverbs 10: 14 “Wise people store up knowledge, but the mouth of the foolish is near destruction.” If you give this some careful thought, you will realise that wise people set a right value on things really worth knowing. But a foolish man shows his ignorance by the things he says. The lesson is that wisdom consists in quietly laying up in our minds truly worthwhile knowledge; while the fool will just open his mouth and say the first thing that comes into his head! Work your way through the book with such contrasts in mind. They will teach you much about wisdom in its character and fruits.

In this study we are going to look at the various evidences of foolishness which these proverbs give. We can place alongside them the meaning of wisdom. Always remember, as we have said before, that true wisdom is found in the Lord Jesus Christ. **“In Him are hidden all the treasures of WISDOM and KNOWLEDGE”.** (Colossians 2: 3) Paul added in **Colossians 2: 10** as he wrote this, **“and you are complete (or ‘filled full’) in Him.”**

1. “Wisdom is too lofty for a fool”. Proverbs 24: 7

On the surface, this may seem an unnecessary thing to say. Surely, you will be thinking, that is what makes him a fool! But according to Proverbs, there is something more to be said than this. It implies that he is a fool, not because he cannot find wisdom, but because he will not. The writer of the book always presents wisdom as being available to ALL. **Chapters 1 and 8** tell us this. We can say, especially when viewing a Christian’s life, that foolishness is present only because wisdom has been refused. That great Russian writer; Alexander Solzhenitsyn, employs this same principle in relation to truth when he says, ‘We do not err because the truth is difficult to see. It is visible at a glance. We err because this is more comfortable.’ Look too, at **James 1: 5**, **“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God.”** The promise is, **“it will be given to him.”** So there is no excuse for folly!

2. “The way of the fool is right in his OWN eyes: but he who heeds counsel is WISE.” Proverbs 12: 15

Do you get the message here? Foolishness is often self-confident and arrogant, and is beyond advice and counsel. Dangers may be in the way and the end of that path may be disaster, but the foolish man is blind in his folly: his ears are closed to the voice of reason. This kind of folly can easily mark us as Christians. If we move out of the pathway of God’s will, immediately our hearts begin to harden to His Word. Wise people will always look for the **“counsel”** of God. We should all be seeking that which is right in His eyes.

3. “Fools mock at sin.” Proverbs 14: 9

This is a disastrous course in connection with folly – mockery of that which is wrong. It suggests that when dealing with those things that are evil, fools are just casual and careless and treat the whole business as a joke. Have you ever met people like this? It could be that they are covering up personal failure in their lives. Perhaps some particular sin has a fatal fascination for them. But this is no joking matter, for it means that the serious nature of their wrongdoing is completely ignored and discounted by them. **Chapter 10: 23** gives us a further picture of a fool looking at mischief as if it were a sport. We can take a lesson for ourselves here. Sin, like a disease, must be treated seriously; otherwise there is the danger of it becoming progressively worse. Wise ones among us will seek the remedy of forgiveness, which comes through the Lord Jesus Christ. Read **Romans chapter 6** with this in mind.

4. “Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, for he will despise the wisdom of your words.” Proverbs 23: 9

If we put this into everyday language, we could say that to talk about wisdom to a fool is a sheer waste of time. This is strong language, but it means that the mind of a fool is closed to wisdom. It possibly reminds us of the way in which many people treated the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. – They would not hear Him. In **2 Timothy 3: 7**,

we read of those who are **“always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.”** Wise Christians treasure the words of the Lord Jesus and through this find blessing.

5. “The wise shall inherit glory: but shame shall be the legacy of fools.” Proverbs 3: 35

We conclude our lesson with considering the end of a life of folly. This verse comes at the close of a fine chapter. It is full of those qualities which go towards building a secure and happy life. The climax is reached in **Proverbs 3: 35**: wisdom is rewarded with glory. But notice how the reward of folly is portrayed – **“shame shall be the legacy of fools.”** The contrast is vivid – glory or shame. Again we can think of everything we have and ARE in the Lord Jesus Christ. **Colossians 1: 27** sums it up for us, **“Christ IN you, the hope of glory.”**

The picture we have just touched upon in this lesson is of the pathway of folly. But remember, **“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”** (9: 10)

Questions

Study 1: THE OBJECT IN VIEW

- a) To which group of writings within the Bible, does the Book of Proverbs belong?
b) Who is the main author/compiler of the Book?
- Solomon is reputed to be the wisest man that ever lived. How did he acquire his wisdom?
- ‘Proverbs’ and ‘puzzling sayings’ are only two of the forms in which wisdom is presented in the Old Testament. What is the purpose behind presenting wisdom in this way?
- Five reasons for writing these proverbs. are given in **chapter 1**. Give one of these, explaining its meaning.
- a) What is the basis of all wisdom?
b) Learn the verse in **chapter 9** in which the phrase, **‘the fear of the Lord’** occurs, then write it out.

Study 2: “MY SON ...”

- What effect upon the Book of Proverbs does the “father – son” method of teaching have?
- What warning is being given to us **chapter 1: 10**?
- What two influences of evil, are we told to avoid at all costs?
- What enriching qualities in our lives, does wisdom offer in **chapter 2**?
- a) What to you understand by **“the chastening of the Lord”** in our lives?
b) What should be our attitude to this?

Study 3: THE CLAIMS OF WISDOM

- Give two illustrations from **chapter 8** of wisdom being personified.
- Explain in your own words the value of wisdom as portrayed in **Proverbs 8: 6-11**.
- What could be the result in the world today if government obeyed God’s Word?
- Which verse in **John 1: 1-18** reminds you of **Proverbs 8: 21-25** and why?
- What lesson can we learn from **Proverbs 8: 34-35**?

Study 4: THE FOOL AND HIS WAYS

- Solomon uses both contrast and comparison in his teaching on wisdom. What important point is he making when using both these methods?
- Write out three verses from **Colossians chapter 1** and one from **Colossians chapter 2** in which the words **“wisdom”** or **“knowledge”** occur.
- Why is ‘folly’ unnecessary in the life of a Christian?
- How should a Christian view sin?
- a) Why is it a sheer waste of time to talk of wisdom to a fool?
b) What is wisdom’s reward?