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PROVERBS

Learning to Live Wisely



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Getting the Most Out of *Proverbs*

Each year thousands of books published in America have titles with the same first two words: “How to . . .” By reading these books you can learn how to get a job, a federal grant, a divorce, free publicity, a mortgage or even a nightclub gig. You can read about how to buy a car, a house, a small business or a personal computer. You can become a balloon artist, an astrologer, an athlete, a golfer, a fashion designer, a good dancer, a pilot, a master manipulator, a mechanic or a vampire. Experts out there will make you an expert at petting a cat, picking lottery numbers, losing five pounds fast, building fences or bearing children.

All these books offer us wisdom—skill in one area or another. Books like these proliferate because we all need wisdom to live successfully. Wisdom brings success and prosperity in our work, in dealings with family and friends, and in our relationship with God. One book of the Bible—the Proverbs of Solomon—specializes in wisdom. It gives us direction and guidance that is practical, concrete, reasonable, wholesome, understandable, shrewd and fruitful. By reading it we gain skill in all areas of life.

Where Did the Book of Proverbs Come From?

The book of Proverbs begins with the notice “The Proverbs of Solomon, Son of David, King of Israel.” This does not mean, however, that Solomon authored every word of the book. In 1 Kings 4:32 we learn that Solomon “spoke three thousand proverbs.” Undoubtedly he composed a substantial number of these proverbs himself.

First Kings 4:34 mentions that kings of surrounding nations sent delegations to hear Solomon's wisdom. On the other hand, an exchange of wisdom must have developed between Solomon and those who came to learn from him. The book of Proverbs reflects this interchange. Approximately three hundred proverbs are labeled "The Proverbs of Solomon" in Proverbs 10:1—22:16. Perhaps this section formed the nucleus of the collection. Some years later King Hezekiah's scribes added about 130 additional Solomonic proverbs, found in Proverbs 25:1—29:27. "Sayings of the Wise" appear in Proverbs 22:17—24:22, followed by "More Sayings of the Wise" in Proverbs 24:23-34. Then come "Sayings of Agur" in Proverbs 30:1-33, "Sayings of King Lemuel" in Proverbs 31:1-9 and the acrostic poem on the virtuous wife in Proverbs 31:10-31. Clearly the book of Proverbs as it comes to us contains a diverse collection of proverbs, from a diversity of wise men and at least one woman who is identified as King Lemuel's mother.

Comparing the book of Proverbs with other ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature sheds light on how the collection arose in the first place. In order to instruct their sons, court officials in many lands would pull together the wisdom they had acquired in a lifetime of diplomatic service. From Egypt we have at least ten such collections, from *The Instruction of Ka-gemni* and *The Instruction of Prince Hor-dedef*, dating from the Old Kingdom (2686-2160 B.C.), to *The Instruction of Onchsheshonqy* in the fourth or fifth century B.C. An Akkadian translation of a Sumerian original titled *The Instructions of Shuruppak* dates from approximately 1300 B.C. Ahiqar, who served as vizier to the Assyrian kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon in the seventh century B.C., left the *Words of Ahiqar*. *The Proverbs of Solomon, Son of David, King of Israel*, takes its place alongside these and other collections. Prophetic authorities added Solomon's proverbs to the canon of Scripture. A manual of instruction for the

king's son became available to all of God's children.

What Will Solomon's Proverbs Do for Me?

Solomon tells us the purpose of the collection in Proverbs 1:2-6:

for attaining wisdom and discipline;
for understanding words of insight;
for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life,
doing what is right and just and fair;
for giving prudence to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the young—
let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance—
for understanding proverbs and parables,
the sayings and riddles of the wise.

This study guide will introduce you to selected proverbs from Solomon's collection, grouped together under ten different themes. Study questions will guide your thoughts as you ponder the meanings of the proverbs and as you learn to live more wisely.

Suggestions for Individual Study

1. As you begin each study, pray that God will speak to you through his Word.

2. Read the introduction to the study and respond to the personal reflection question or exercise. This is designed to help you focus on God and on the theme of the study.

3. Each study deals with a particular passage—so that you can delve into the author's meaning in that context. Read and reread the passage to be studied. The questions are written using the language of the New International Version, so you may wish to use that version of the Bible. The New Revised Standard Version is also recommended.

4. This is an inductive Bible study, designed to help you discover for yourself what Scripture is saying. The study includes three types of questions. *Observation* questions ask about the basic facts: who, what, when, where and how. *Interpretation* questions delve into the meaning of the passage. *Application* questions help you discover the implications of the text for growing in Christ. These three keys unlock the treasures of Scripture.

Write your answers to the questions in the spaces provided or in a personal journal. Writing can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God's Word.

5. It might be good to have a Bible dictionary handy. Use it to look up any unfamiliar words, names or places.

6. Use the prayer suggestion to guide you in thanking God for what you have learned and to pray about the applications that have come to mind.

7. You may want to go on to the suggestion under "Now or Later," or you may want to use that idea for your next study.

Suggestions for Members of a Group Study

1. Come to the study prepared. Follow the suggestions for individual study mentioned above. You will find that careful preparation will greatly enrich your time spent in group discussion.

2. Be willing to participate in the discussion. The leader of your group will not be lecturing. Instead, he or she will be encouraging the members of the group to discuss what they have learned. The leader will be asking the questions that are found in this guide.

3. Stick to the topic being discussed. Your answers should be based on the verses which are the focus of the discussion and not on outside authorities such as commentaries or speakers. These studies focus on a particular passage of Scripture. Only

rarely should you refer to other portions of the Bible. This allows for everyone to participate in in-depth study on equal ground.

4. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they describe what they have learned. You may be surprised by their insights! Each question assumes a variety of answers. Many questions do not have “right” answers, particularly questions that aim at meaning or application. Instead the questions push us to explore the passage more thoroughly.

When possible, link what you say to the comments of others. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to express our thoughts that we leave too little opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to also.

6. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have an enjoyable and profitable time together, but also that as a result of the study you will find ways that you can take action individually and/or as a group.

7. Remember that anything said in the group is considered confidential and should not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.

8. If you are the group leader, you will find additional suggestions at the back of the guide.

- ¹Wisdom has built her house;
she has hewn out its seven pillars.
- ²She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine;
she has also set her table.
- ³She has sent out her maids, and she calls
from the highest point of the city.
- ⁴“Let all who are simple come in here!”
she says to those who lack judgment.
- ⁵“Come, eat my food
and drink the wine I have mixed.
- ⁶Leave your simple ways and you will live;
walk in the way of understanding.
- ⁷“Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult;
whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse.
- ⁸Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you;
rebuke a wise man and he will love you.
- ⁹Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still;
teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning.
- ¹⁰“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.
- ¹¹For through me your days will be many,
and years will be added to your life.
- ¹²If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you;
if you are a mocker, you alone will suffer.”
- ¹³The woman Folly is loud;
she is undisciplined and without knowledge.
- ¹⁴She sits at the door of her house,
on a seat at the highest point of the city,
- ¹⁵calling out to those who pass by,
who go straight on their way.
- ¹⁶“Let all who are simple come in here!”
she says to those who lack judgement.
- ¹⁷“Stolen water is sweet;
food eaten in secret is delicious!”
- ¹⁸But little do they know that the dead are there,
that her guests are in the depths of the grave.

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The Choice

Proverbs 9

An invitation to dinner is always welcome, until you get invitations to two different dinners, each held at the same time as the other. Then you have to decide which one to accept and which one to decline. No doubt you'll make your decision based on many factors—the reputation of the host and hostess, the prospects for a good time, your own tastes in people and food.

GROUP DISCUSSION. When have you had to make a difficult choice between two social events? How did you make the decision?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What difficulties do you have in facing choices? Is it ever a struggle for you to say no? Why or why not?

Proverbs 9 presents the dilemma of deciding between two dinner invitations. But these are no ordinary dinners, and the invitations come from no ordinary hostesses. Which one you attend will largely determine your health, your wealth and your happiness for the rest of your life. *Read Proverbs 9.*

1. Describe Lady Wisdom's feast.

Describe Woman Folly's feast.

2. Do Lady Wisdom and Woman Folly invite the same people or different people to their feasts? Explain.

3. Do you think you're among those specifically invited to Lady Wisdom's dinner? Explain.

4. Do you think Lady Wisdom would welcome the mocker of verses 7-8? Why or why not?

5. What resources does each hostess have to offer her guests?

6. Which hostess appears to offer the most pleasure to her guests? Explain.

7. What do verses 7-12 tell us about how Lady Wisdom imparts benefits to her guests?

8. After reading verse 10, do you think that knowledge and understanding must be explicitly Judeo-Christian in order to be genuine? Why or why not?

9. Proverbs 9 is, of course, an extended metaphor—an allegory. Wisdom is like a wealthy woman inviting guests to a feast. Who embodies the person of Lady Wisdom in their relationship to you?

10. How (in what situations or with which people) have you encountered Woman Folly?

11. No matter which “invitation” you accept, your decision will result in both pleasure and pain. How do the pleasure and pain from dining at Lady Wisdom’s house differ from the pleasure and pain one finds at Woman Folly’s abode?

12. What helps you to choose wisdom?

Pray that you would leave your “simple ways” and be made worthy of dinner with Lady Wisdom.

Now or Later

Reflect more on Proverbs 9:6. What attitudes or habits do you have that might be classified as “simple”? Make this a matter of prayer and reflection, asking God to reveal true wisdom to you.

¹My son, keep my words
and store up my commands within
you.

²Keep my commands and you will live;
guard my teachings as the apple of
your eye.

³Bind them on your fingers;
write them on the tablet of your
heart.

⁴Say to wisdom, "You are my sister,"
and call understanding your kins-
man;

⁵they will keep you from the adulter-
ess,
from the wayward wife with her
seductive words.

⁶At the window of my house
I looked out through the lattice.

⁷I saw among the simple,
I noticed among the young men,
a youth who lacked judgment.

⁸He was going down the street near
her corner,
walking along in the direction of
her house

⁹at twilight, as the day was fading,
as the dark of night set in.

¹⁰Then out came a woman to meet him,
dressed like a prostitute and with
crafty intent.

¹¹(She is loud and defiant,
her feet never stay at home;

¹²now in the street, now in the
squares,
at every corner she lurks.)

¹³She took hold of him and kissed him
and with a brazen face she said:

¹⁴"I have fellowship offerings at home;

today I fulfilled my vows.

¹⁵So I came out to meet you;
I looked for you and have found
you!

¹⁶I have covered my bed
with colored linens from Egypt.

¹⁷I have perfumed my bed
with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon.

¹⁸Come, let's drink deep of love till
morning;
let's enjoy ourselves with love!

¹⁹My husband is not at home;
he has gone on a long journey.

²⁰He took his purse filled with money
and will not be home till full moon."

²¹With persuasive words she led him
astray;
she seduced him with her smooth
talk.

²²All at once he followed her
like an ox going to the slaughter,
like a deer stepping into a noose

²³till an arrow pierces his liver,
like a bird darting into a snare,
little knowing it will cost him his
life.

²⁴Now then, my sons, listen to me;
Pay attention to what I say.

²⁵Do not let your heart turn to her
ways.
or stray into her paths.

²⁶Many are the victims she has brought
down;
her slain are a mighty throng.

²⁷Her house is a highway to the
grave,
leading down to the chambers of
death.

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