



PROVERBS

SKILL IN THE ART OF LIVING

PART ONE – “THE GATEWAY TO WISDOM”

By Pastor Ricky Stephen

Proverbs 1:1-7; 9:10

I. Grab a Brain

People from the wind-swept plains are poetic by nature. Sayings like ‘You can’t plant a crop in your mouth’ or ‘He’s all hat and no cattle’ carry wisdom through metaphor. My favourite prairie poeticism is ‘Grab a brain.’ A verbal slap – it’s what a prairie dad might say when you’ve let the cattle escape.

The truth is life is full of small decisions with big consequences. While some flounder, others seem to move through the chaos with grace. What they have isn’t just smarts—it’s *wisdom*. The Hebrew word is *hokmah* [Chokmah חִכְמָה (hāḵmā)], which we might define as, ‘skill at the art of living.’

This summer at Summit Drive, we’re turning to the book of *Proverbs*, a whole book devoted to wisdom. Its very existence tells us something vital: God wants us to be wise. God wants us to be skilled in living well.

II. The Purpose of Proverbs

Scripture is a library of diverse genres—history, poetry, letters, philosophy and more. If it were arranged like a bookstore, *Proverbs* would land in the self-help section. It’s the most practical book in the Bible, focused on everyday life: relationships, work, speech and integrity. Proverbs 1:1–6 sets out the book’s purpose, highlighting three key truths:

a. Life is Weird, We Need Wisdom

Robert Alter translates Proverbs 1:4 as, “...To give shrewdness to the simple, to a lad, knowledge and cunning.”¹ That word *shrewdness* is the same word used of the serpent in Genesis—*crafty*. This isn’t a negative trait here – it’s about navigating complex, messy situations. That’s why Jesus tells us to be, “... wise as serpents...” (Matthew 10:16).

Wisdom is discernment. Discernment is the ability to make good decisions when no rulebook applies.²

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¹ Alter, Robert. (8 Jan 2019). The Hebrew Bible: A Translation and Commentary: The Writings, Prov 1:4.

² Motz, Brian (Content Host). (June 25, 2021). “Episode 447: Wisdom & Rule, with James Jordan”: The Theopolis Podcast: Episode 447 [Audio Podcast]. Soundcloud. <https://soundcloud.com/user-812874628/episode-447-wisdom-and-rule-with-james-jordan?in=noe-palacios-228003660/sets/wisdom>.

Solomon's famous ruling between two women claiming the same child (1 Kings 3) illustrates this. There was no law for that situation—just wisdom. Today's challenges—AI, dating, education and politics—are equally complex. We need more than rules - we need discernment.

b. Seek Wisdom Wherever It's Found

The Book of Proverbs draws from other cultures, including Egyptian sayings (Proverbs 22:17ff³), showing a willingness to learn even from rivals. Proverbs 4:7 urges us to get wisdom at any cost—even outside familiar places.

c. Wisdom Is Righteousness and Justice

Proverbs 1:3 links wisdom with righteousness, justice and uprightness. Wisdom isn't just about living well - it's about living rightly. Unlike modern self-help, which centers on the self, Proverbs connects wisdom to moral character and godliness.

Ultimately, Proverbs teaches that God wants us to be wise—skilled in the art of living faithfully and justly in a complex world.

III. The Gateway to Wisdom

One proverb is treated as a master concept for the whole book. It's positioned to be the gateway into wisdom, structurally. The Book of Proverbs structure runs like this:

- **1:1-6:** Statement of Purpose
- **1:7:** Gateway
- **1:8-9:18:** Ten Speeches from Father to Son
- **10-30:** The Proverbs:
 - **10-22:16:** Proverbs of Solomon I
 - **22:17-24:34:** The Sayings of the Wise
 - **25-29:27:** Proverbs of Solomon II
 - **30-31:9:** More Sayings of the Wise
- **31:10-31:** Epilogue: A Wise Wife

Proverbs 1:7 is the epigraph to the book. It reads:

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

How is this true? What does it mean for the fear of the Lord to be the beginning of knowledge?

IV. Knowledge: Modern Gnosticism vs. Ancient Pragmatism

To understand this proverb, we need to look at some terms. First, knowledge.

Today's culture equates knowledge with information—scientific papers, TED Talks, life hacks—the Biblical view is more grounded. Modern presentations of knowledge often promise transformation through secret insights, creating a kind of secular Gnosticism: the belief that knowing more will make life easier. Yet, as Brewell—being yet we know more than ever about health and well-being yet still struggle deeply.⁴ The problem isn't knowledge itself, but the framework in which we pursue it—often detached from action or character.

In Scripture, knowledge is not about accumulation but application. The first person filled with ‘knowledge’ is Bezalel, a craftsman empowered by God to create. In Hebrew thought, to ‘know’ something is to embody it—to act on it. Hearing implies obeying; knowing implies doing. So, if you know good sleep hygiene but don’t practice it, Biblically, you don’t really know it.

The Book of Proverbs challenges a culture that prizes intelligence, even when divorced from wisdom or morality. The Book of Proverbs praises wisdom—'skill in the art of living'—because it guides how knowledge is used. Knowledge must submit to wisdom. Splitting the

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³ “ff” is a Latin form of and the verses that follow

⁴ Brown, B. (1 Mar 2022). *The Gifts of Imperfection*. Hazelden Publishing. Ch. 1.

atom can lead to power plants or bombs; wisdom determines which. God doesn't value intellect over action—neither should we.

V. Fear: A Powerful Motivator

The next word to explore is fear.

Fear is a motivator which determines how we will use our knowledge. Fear often drives human behavior—whether in relationships, career decisions or moral compromises. The question isn't *if* we're motivated by fear, but *which* fear motivates us. Jesus addresses this directly in Matthew 10:28, urging His followers not to fear those who can kill the body but to fear God—the One who has ultimate authority over both soul and body.

This is not a call to terror, but a reordering of fears. The fear of God is not about dread but about perspective. If we're going to be motivated by fear, Jesus says, let it be a rational fear—of the eternal, all-powerful Creator—not of temporary threats. Compared to God, all other fears are like fearing minnows when there's a great white shark in the water.

In Biblical thought, the fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of wisdom. It's often our first step into a deeper maturity. Like children who avoid touching a hot stove not because they understand science but because they fear consequences; so too adults may first turn to God because of fear—fear of death, destruction or where society is heading. That's not necessarily bad.

At a young age we can already start to see people choosing a foolish path, sometimes leading to destroyed relationships or even death. Fear of ending up on the path to destruction is a legitimate reason to seek wisdom. Many are turning to the church today because of their fear about the direction of society.

VI. The End of Wisdom

Now we come to the last word in our phrase—beginning. Not the end.

After Jesus gives a terrifying warning about fearing God, His next words are deeply comforting:

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care... So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”

Matthew 10:29–31

Yes, God is powerful enough to end you with a thought; but He won't. He loves you—so much that He's numbered every hair on your head (and He loves bald people too).

Wisdom begins with fear, but it doesn't end there. As Paul says, "*When I was a child... I reasoned like a child.*" (1 Corinthians 13:11) We may sometimes begin with fear—but we grow into love.

Re-enchant yourself with this truth: the God who created galaxies wants your good. He's journaling your days (Psalm 139:16). The end of wisdom is being swept up in awe of His affection.

Jesus said the greatest commands are to love God and love your neighbor. So, if you want to seek wisdom in the manner that Proverbs lays out, ask two questions:

Will this help me love God more?

Will this help me love people more?

This is the way into wisdom—and into the art of truly living.

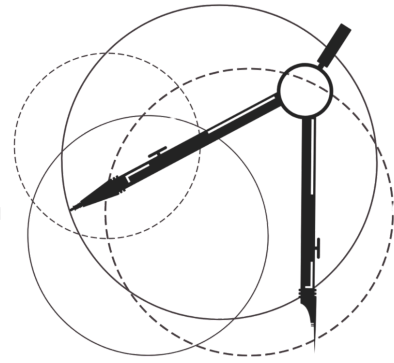
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Discussion



Reflection

- What area of your life do you need wisdom and discernment in right now? Pray for the wisdom needed (see James 1:2-8).
- What is something you know you should do but don't do it? What's getting in the way of you moving forward?
- How is fear motivating you in bad ways? How is fear motivating you in good ways?
- Plan to pursue wisdom this summer. Prioritize the things the help you love God and love people.

APPENDIX: HOW TO USE PROVERBS

This summer, our hope as a church is to steep ourselves in the wisdom of Proverbs. But this book invites a different approach than most others. The Book of Proverbs isn't meant to be speed-read—it's a book to sit with, to meditate on, to 'chew the cud,' as the rabbis would say.

- Chapters 1–9 serve as the introduction. They give us the book's purpose, a guiding epigraph (1:7), and ten speeches from a father to a son about wisdom. This section works well with a 'chapter-a-day' reading rhythm.
- Chapters 10–30 contain collections of short, poetic couplets. These proverbs are often loosely connected but are mostly designed to stand alone—ideal for slow, focused meditation and memorization.

GENERAL GOALS FOR READING THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

Go Slow	Stop when something grabs your attention. Sit with it. If it takes three years to get through the book, that's perfectly fine.
Memorize Individual Proverbs	These sayings are written poetically so we can remember and apply them. Like the phrase "fail to plan and you plan to fail"—it sticks because of the way it's worded.
Read in Multiple Translations/Versions	English versions vary in how they handle the poetry. When meditating on a proverb, read it in several translations. While the King James Version isn't always clearest elsewhere, it often preserves the poetic force of Proverbs well, thanks to its translators' classical training.
Be Biased Toward Action	Proverbs are meant to be lived. The goal of meditation is obedience. If all you do this summer is live out one proverb, that's a win.

STRATEGIES FOR INTERNALIZING PROVERBS

Rewrite Proverbs in a Journal.	Use a general journal or a dedicated wisdom notebook. Rewriting helps with memorization and makes the proverb more personally accessible. You might even blend a few translations into a version that sticks best for you.
Put Them in Front of Your Eyes	Use sticky notes or other visible reminders. Place proverbs on your fridge, your desk, your mirror—anywhere you'll see them often.
Practice Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading)	<p>Read: Slowly read a chapter or section of Proverbs several times. Look for a verse that 'leaps off the page.'</p> <p>Meditate: Reflect on that proverb. What is it saying? Have you seen this truth in your life? Why might God be highlighting it now?</p> <p>Pray: Talk to God about what you're noticing. Ask for wisdom and strength to live it out.</p> <p>Contemplate: Spend a few quiet moments in God's presence, letting the proverb stick to your soul.</p>