

# The Way of Wisdom

A Year of Daily Devotions  
in the Book of Proverbs

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KELLER

with KATHY KELLER



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*To Bruce and Missy Terrell  
Wise leaders and friends  
whose wisdom and love have guided both us  
and Redeemer Presbyterian Church for many years.*

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## INTRODUCTION

*There may* be readers picking up this book who profited from our earlier yearlong devotional book, *My Rock; My Refuge*. In that case especially, it is helpful to reflect on the differences between Psalms and Proverbs. The Psalms are filled with expressions of emotion, of pain, joy, and praise. They show us how to process our experiences before God. Proverbs is a very different book. It calls us to study, to think, to learn the practical discipline of centering all our thoughts and actions on God. Indeed, one of the main messages of Proverbs is—you've never really thought enough about anything. Psalms is about how to throw ourselves fully upon God in faith. Proverbs is about how, having trusted God, we should then live that faith out. If the Bible were a medicine cabinet, Psalms would be the ointment put on inflamed skin to calm and heal it. Proverbs would be more like smelling salts to startle you into alertness. Here are a few pointers for studying the book of Proverbs with profit.

### Proverbs as Poetry

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*Proverbs* is not a set of “simple steps to a happy life” for quick consumption. A proverb is a poetic art form that instills wisdom in you as you wrestle with it. As English readers we cannot receive the full force of the original, and yet we can still learn enough about the features of Hebrew poetry to discern layers of meaning that we would otherwise miss. Perhaps the most fundamental mark of Hebrew poetry is parallelism. Two phrases, clauses, or sentences are brought into close connection with each other so that they modify and expand on each other. The second may magnify and extend the thought of the first, or it may instead offer a counterpoint that limits and softens the first idea.

In each case the two thoughts mutually clarify each other, sharpening our understanding. So Proverbs 13:6 says, “Righteousness

guards the person of integrity, but wickedness overthrows the sinner.” The first clause helps us understand “wickedness” in the second clause more specifically as a lack of integrity. Because of parallelism, the words “wicked” and “righteous” and “wise” and “foolish,” which show up constantly and (seemingly) repetitiously, actually mean somewhat different things in each proverb. We miss much of the meaning of a proverb unless we compare the clauses very closely and watch for the interplay between words.

Another prominent feature of Hebrew poetry, as in all poetry, is the importance of vivid images. A beautiful but foolish woman is like a gold ring in a pig’s snout (Proverbs 11:22); a lazy employee is like vinegar to the teeth (Proverbs 10:26). Images and metaphors are always invitations to think out the many ways that “this is like that.” A thoughtful reader can list five, then ten, then more ways that the image explains the principle.

## Proverbs as Puzzle

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*Goethe once* said of languages that “whoever know only one, knows none,” and that is likely true, but it is even more true of proverbs.<sup>1</sup> If one proverb says, “The morally good *always* have a good life,” and later another says, “Sometimes the morally good suffer,” we modern readers think we’ve found a contradiction. That’s because we think of proverbs either as individual stand-alone promises or commands. But usually they are neither. Each is a description of some aspect of how life works. One proverb on marriage, taken all by itself, seems to apply to every instance. A later proverb, however, reveals that there are some marriage situations in which a different practice is required. Only taken and fitted together, with each one modifying the others as the parallel clauses do, do the proverbs yield a full, multidimensional picture of a particular topic.

Proverbs, then, give up their meaning only cumulatively. No one saying gives you the whole picture. Proverbs 29:19 says that

servants simply can't understand the reason they should do things, so you just have to be very strict with them. This seems to be a sweeping statement about their capabilities, but Proverbs 17:2 tells us that a wise servant can end up being better than a family member. Only when the two are placed together can we see that 29:19 is not talking about all servants and employees but rather about those with an unresponsive, sullen attitude.<sup>2</sup>

So if we read Proverbs' various statements on a subject all together, we can see many larger points. In chapter 12 we are told that the path toward disaster can seem to be the right one to a fool, but in chapter 16, that the disastrous road can appear to be right to *anyone*. In other words, sometimes, even if you have done due diligence, your choices may still go wrong, because it is a broken world. The wise know that sometimes "all paths may run ill." As we will see, there *is* an order God put into things when he created the world and by which we must abide. But on the other hand this is a fallen world, distorted by sin, and the wise know that the created order does not always work, nor is it always easy to discern.

Only all together do the proverbs bring us a wise, nuanced, theologically rich, many-faceted view of the world.

## Proverbs as Pedagogy

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*Many have* concluded that the book of Proverbs was originally a manual for the instruction of young men. The addressees are always "sons." If that is the case, then it makes sense that we should have warnings against predatory, adulterous women in chapters 5 through 7 but no analogous warning about predatory, adulterous men.<sup>3</sup> Modern readers sometimes chafe, therefore, at how male oriented the book is. We should not conclude from this, however, that Proverbs is more negative about female character than male, or that women should not be instructed in wisdom while men should be.

We have seen that the creation and dissemination of proverbs took a great deal of artistry and deep learning. Yet in Proverbs 1:8; 4:3; 10:1, and elsewhere it is both father *and* mother who are instructing their son. The mother was “an authoritative voice along with the father.”<sup>4</sup> This surely means that daughters as well as sons must have been trained in the terse poetry and epigrammatic wisdom of proverbs. Indeed, the idealized wife of Proverbs 31:26 “speaks with wisdom” and “faithful instruction is on her tongue.” These are technical terms meaning she speaks at length with great solemnity and imparts the wisdom of the ages.<sup>5</sup> So while the original readers of Proverbs were male, not female, the wisdom and training of this book nevertheless applies to everyone.

We should, however, never forget that Proverbs was written not for private reading but as a manual to be worked through in a community of learners, with older, wiser mentors. At the very least, then, we would like to urge you to use this daily devotional together with a group of friends. Here is a suggested way to do this.

Choose one or more friends and agree to use the devotional together, each reading the same reflection individually, in private, on the same day. At the end of each reflection there is a question that helps you think more personally about how the teaching applies to your life. Write the answer to the question in a journal. Then write answers to two additional questions about the day’s proverb(s) in your journal, unless your response to the first query has already included them.

1. Where in your life or the life of someone else have you seen this observation illustrated?
2. How can you put this observation into practice—in thought, attitude, word, or deed?

After completing your journal entry, pray the prayer at the end of each page. These short prayers are just “on ramps”—suggested ways to begin talking to God personally about what he is

teaching you in his Word. Put the prayer in your own words if you wish, and then continue speaking to him about how the particular Scriptural teaching should play out in your life. This should be your daily routine—read, meditate using the journal questions, and pray.

Then meet with your friends who are doing the same daily exercise as often as you can. Share your best insights, discuss them together, encourage one another to apply the insights to your lives, and report to one another on how your efforts are going.

## Proverbs as Part of the Whole Bible

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*While we* call Proverbs a “book,” it really is one chapter in a much larger book—the Bible—which presents, through all its various parts and narratives, a single, coherent story. That story is that the human race has marred God’s good creation through sin and now needs salvation, and that this salvation has been accomplished and can be found only in Jesus Christ. Therefore, like every other part of the Bible, Proverbs will give up its fullest and richest meaning only when it is read in the light of the person and work of Jesus. Jesus dazzled his listeners with his wisdom (Luke 2:40,47; Mark 6:2). He claimed to be the new Solomon with the ultimate wisdom (Luke 11:31). The personified Wisdom that created the world (Proverbs 8:22–31) is finally revealed to be Jesus, the Word of God, with whom God created the world (John 1:1–4.) Paul calls Jesus the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30), the one in whom all God’s wisdom is hidden (Colossians 2:3).

Remember, too, that “the fear of the Lord” (Proverbs 1:7, 9:10) is the beginning of wisdom. A living, vital relationship with God is wisdom’s absolute prerequisite. This “fear,” as we will see, is not cringing terror but an attitude of awe and wonder before the faithful, covenant love of God. The New Testament shows us that the kind of relationship with the Lord that Proverbs calls for can be fully realized only through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.



## The Themes of Proverbs

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*Perhaps the* most challenging aspect of the study of Proverbs is the task of synthesizing all that it says on a particular subject. In this devotional book, the first weeks of the year examine the general teaching on the subject of wisdom in the first nine chapters of Proverbs. After that, however, I have grouped the daily readings into sets of topics, enabling the reader to accumulate the various insights on a specific theme, piecing together the wisdom that the book offers on the subject. Readers should expect that some proverbs recur in more than one daily reading. The reason is that many proverbs do not speak strictly to one topic, but have implications for practice under several headings of wise living. The themes are listed below.

### **Knowing wisdom: January 1–February 7**

What is wisdom?  
What is foolishness?  
How do we become wise?  
The case for wisdom

### **Knowing God: February 8–March 23**

The fear of the Lord  
God's order perceived  
God's order disrupted (Ecclesiastes)  
God's order hidden (Job)

### **Knowing the heart: March 24–June 12**

Understanding the heart  
Reordering desires  
Understanding temptation  
Understanding emotion  
The Seven Deadly Sins

### **Knowing others: June 13–August 10**

Friendship  
Words  
Gossip  
Listening  
Conflicts

### **Knowing the times and seasons: August 11– September 3**

Guidance, planning, and decision making  
Insights for our age

### **Knowing the spheres: September 4–December 14**

Marriage  
Sex  
Parenting  
Money and work  
Power  
Justice

### **Knowing Jesus, the true wisdom of God: December 15–December 31**

In each day's reflections, text references for Proverbs will be cited only by chapter and verse numbers. (So "10:13" rather than "Proverbs 10:13.") Text references for every other book of the Bible will have chapter and verse numbers accompanied by the name of the book. (So "Psalm 37:29.") Also, words and phrases taken from that day's biblical text that are quoted in the body of the reflection will be in italics rather than within quotation marks.

# KNOWING WISDOM

## *What Is Wisdom?*

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### January 1

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The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel . . . for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise. (1:1,6)

**WHAT IS A PROVERB?** A proverb (Hebrew *masal*) is a poetic, terse, vivid, thought-provoking saying that conveys a world of truth in a few words. Modern people do not have a category for proverbs. They are neither absolute commands nor promises, and often they are partial. That is, they need to be put beside other proverbs on the same subject to get the full picture. They are observations about how life works. The point of a proverb, then, is to get rightly related to reality through hard thinking and sustained reflection. A proverb is like hard candy: If you just bite down on it, you get little out of it and may even get a broken tooth. Instead you must meditate on it until the sweetness of insight comes.

Wisdom is not only for “deep thinkers.” It is how you get through daily life. It helps you know what to do when your child comes home from school with a black eye, or when you suddenly come into unexpected money, or when you lose your job. What do you do that won’t make things worse? Our wisdom will guide us as we grow in the knowledge and image of his Son, Jesus, who is Wisdom itself.

In what area of life do you most need to grow in wisdom?

*Prayer:* Lord, I’d prefer if you would simply tell me what to do through some inner voice or some book of specific rules for every situation. Instead I hear you calling me to grow into a wise person who discerns what to do. Help me to answer that call, and give me understanding. Amen.

## January 2

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The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for gaining wisdom. (1:1–2a)

**NOT JUST MORAL.** The main word for *wisdom* in Proverbs (Hebrew *hokma*) includes being moral but goes beyond that. It is making the right choice even when there are no clear moral laws telling you explicitly what to do. Some decisions require only knowledge (like the proper medicine to take) and some only compliance with rules (like whether to commit adultery or not). But no Bible verse will tell you exactly whom to marry, which job to take, whether to move or stay put. Yet a wrong decision can be disastrous. And there are no explicit moral laws against character flaws such as abrasiveness, impulsiveness, emotional fragility, and disorganization, yet they can also damage the course of your life.<sup>6</sup>

If God had given us a hundred-volume set of rules for every situation, we would have relied on the book and our diligence. But when we see what wisdom truly is, we will be driven to look to Jesus, of whom it was said, “What’s this wisdom that has been given him?” (Mark 6:2).

Have you ever seen an example of a good and moral person who was very unwise?

*Prayer:* Lord, I tend to be smug about my right beliefs. I love to think I know the truth, but even when I do, I don’t know how to use it. Please bring into my life what is necessary for wisdom to grow, and then remind me that I received it from you. Amen.