

8 studies on Proverbs

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Notes

1. In preparing these studies I've used the following sources: Roger Green's Bible study booklet on Proverbs from term 2, 2000; Bible Briefs from The Briefing magazine # 283 and # 327; the Pathway Bible Guide, The Art of Living by Bryson Smith, The Tree of Life Reading Proverbs Today by Graeme Goldsworthy, Gospel and Wisdom by Graeme Goldsworthy, Arts of the Wise Leader by Mark Strom and some unpublished notes by Mark Strom, The Message of Proverbs by David Atkinson, Life Application Study Bible and Promoting the Gospel by John Dickson.

2. Some groups may find the studies too long for the time allocated. My suggestion is for individuals to do the whole study before you meet but if the group runs out of time then skip to the "To finish" questions for the last few minutes. Or if the group gets involved in a particularly interesting and relevant point then run with it rather than feeling obliged to complete all the remaining questions.

3. Throughout the studies I've added paragraphs to fill in the extra detail that I thought would help groups better understand the Biblical text.

4. I'm always trying to improve Bible studies so your comments, good or bad, and ideas about future studies may help me produce better studies. Please write down any thoughts you have and send them to me at biridocon@bigpond.com or ring me on 9971 4897.

Ed O'Connor April 2009

Study 1, The Gaining of Wisdom, Proverbs 1:1-6

Getting started

1. Who are the “wise” people in our society?

2. We call these people “wise” because of what qualities?

3. Is wisdom different to intelligence? How?

“Only a fool tries to define wisdom. It is too vast to pin down, way too subtle to analyse like a scientist would an insect impaled on a board. Wisdom is like love – it is the richness of the experience we long for, not the precision of a definition. Love is far more subtle than our definitions, bigger than our analysis, beyond our attempts to manage it. Yet we know love when we see it. Even more so when we receive it. Wisdom is like this. It lives in people. We see it when we think of those who have deeply influenced our lives for good. We may not be able to define wisdom exhaustively but our recollections enable us to recognise and comprehend wisdom well enough to talk about it meaningfully.” From Arts of the Wise Leader by Mark Strom pp 15 and 16.

Light from the Word

4. Read Proverbs 1:1, 10:1, 22:17, 25:1, 30:1, 31:1. Who wrote Proverbs?

“... it is highly unlikely that the title “The proverbs of Solomon” is meant to suggest that Solomon was responsible for the whole process by which all the included sayings reached their present form. It is more likely that he took it upon himself to gather as much of the oral wisdom tradition that he could and to commit it to writing. To this he would have added some sayings based on his own experiences.” From The Tree of Life Reading Proverbs Today by Graeme Goldsworthy p28.

5. Read Proverbs 1:2-6.
(a) What do you think is meant by the following words?
“wisdom”

“insight”

“prudence”

“discretion”

“discerning”

(b) Why was Proverbs written?

6. Read 1 Kings 3:5-14 and 1 Kings 4:29-34.
Why is it worthwhile learning from Solomon?

7. Read Matt 7:24-29 and Matt 12:38-42.
Why is it worthwhile learning from Jesus?

8. How do we gain wisdom? Is it a gift from God or something that we learn and develop or both?
What answers do the following passages give?
Proverbs 2:1-9

Proverbs 4:1-7

Matt 7:24-27

James 1:5

To finish

9. (a) Do people in our society want to be wiser people?

(b) If so, what do they want to use their wisdom for?

(c) Is this any different to how followers of Jesus should use their wisdom?

(d) Give an example of wisdom in your own life that reflects your faith in Jesus?

⁵Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. ⁶Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone (Colossians 4:5-6).

Throughout the Bible, 'wisdom' is not a mental quality – like intelligence or cleverness – but an ethical outlook. Wisdom is knowledge of God's path of righteousness (see Colossians 1:9-10, 1:28, 2:23 and James 3:17). When Paul urges the Colossians to conduct their lives before outsiders *wisely* (literally, 'in wisdom'), he does not mean that they should be shrewd in their dealings with unbelievers; he means that they should act (literally, 'walk') in a godly fashion." From Promoting the Gospel by John Dickson p 142.

Study 2, The Beginning of Wisdom, Proverbs 1:7

Getting started

1. What is fear?

2. Who or what are you afraid of?

Light from the Word

3. Read Proverbs 1:7 and Psalm 34:9-16.
What does Psalm 34:9-16 teach us about “the fear of the Lord”?

4. “I fear God, yet am not afraid of Him. A right fear of God is not meant to immobilise but to cause you to pay attention when He speaks and obey when He commands.” From Roger Green’s Bible study booklet on Proverbs, term 2, 2000.

What are the consequences of having “the fear of the Lord” if we pay attention and obey the wisdom of the following passages?

Proverbs 1:7, 9:10, 15:33

Proverbs 3:7, 8:13, 16:6, 24:21

Proverbs 14:26-27, 19:23

Proverbs 15:16, 22:4

Study 3, Wisdom, Life and Jesus, Proverbs ch 9

We are jumping to ch 9 (and some bits of ch 8) for this study to learn about Proverbs' view of Wisdom and Folly, life and Jesus. We will come back to some earlier chapters in the next study to see how Proverbs sees Wisdom and Folly in real life situations.

Getting started

1. When you need some advice who do you go to?

Why him/her/them?

2. Do you know people who are always wanting to give advice but you *don't* listen to them?

Why don't you listen?

Light from the Word

3. Read Proverbs ch 9.

(a) What offer is made by Wisdom (v1-12)?

(b) What is attractive about this offer?

4. (a) What offer is made by Folly (v13-18)?

(b) What is attractive about this offer?

(c) What are the consequences of accepting this offer?

5. (a) Read John 6:1-59 and, while reading, look for 3 reasons why Jesus fed the 5000.

(b) Read Proverbs 9:1-6 again. How does Jesus fulfil Proverbs 9:1-6?
(Hint: Compare Prov 9:5-6 with John 6:33, 35, 47-48, 51, 53, 57)

6. Read Proverbs 8:22-31 and Col 1:15-20.
(a) How does Jesus fulfil Proverbs 8:22-31? (Hint: Note particularly Prov 8:30)

(b) How does Jesus surpass Proverbs 8:22-31?

To finish

7. How is Wisdom in Proverbs related to Jesus?

Study 4, The Opposite of Wisdom, Proverbs chs 1 – 8

In the last study we looked at what Wisdom and Folly offer us. This study looks at some specific examples of what Folly offers in Proverbs chs 1 – 8 and the advice given by Wisdom.

Getting started

"I fear God, yet am not afraid of Him. A right fear of God is not meant to immobilise but to cause you to pay attention when He speaks and obey when He commands." From Roger Green's Bible study booklet on Proverbs, term 2, 2000.

1. Why is it hard to live "in the fear of the Lord"?

Light from the Word

Temptation

Read Proverbs 1:8-19.

2. (a) What are they trying to get the son to do?

(b) What is the father's advice? (v 10)

(c) What are the consequences of following them?

3. Looking at the bigger picture:
(a) Why is sin so personally tempting?

(b) What are the consequences of sin?

(c) What bearing does Jesus have on sin and its consequences?

Adultery

Read Proverbs ch 5.

4. (a) What is wise about avoiding adultery?

(b) How is the adulteress described?

(c) How is the alternative (to 4.(b)) described?

(d) What does this passage say about sex *before* marriage?

(e) Read Matt 5:27-30. What does Jesus say about this subject?

Laziness

Read Proverbs 6:6-11.

5. (a) What does the ant do well?

(b) What happens to the sluggard?

(c) How does a time of rest, weekends, holidays etc. fit in to this advice?

(d) What good things come from generalisations like these?

(e) What are the dangers of generalisations?

To finish

6. What are some other areas of temptation besides those mentioned in this study?

7. Read Gal 3:21-4:7

What is the best way to beat sin? Choose (a) or (b) and discuss your reasons:

(a) concentrate on making up rules for yourself

or (b) concentrate on understanding Jesus and his gospel.

What's your experience been like under the two alternatives?

Study 5, The Patterns of Wisdom, Proverbs ch 16

Why are we jumping to chapter 16 of Proverbs? We are not going to study every verse in every chapter of Proverbs so one chapter, chapter 16, has been selected to look at a few key ideas that crop up in chapters 10 to 29.

Getting started

1. How would you describe an average day in your life in one word or phrase e.g. chaotic, orderly, busy, relaxed, intense, stressful or boring?

2. What is the general pattern, if any, for your week?

3. (a) How do unexpected events fit into the pattern of your week?

- (b) How do you cope with those unexpected events?

Light from the Word

4. Read Proverbs ch 16 and sort the verses under various headings e.g. plans (man's and God's), pride, fear of the Lord, atonement, work, gossip.

5. (a) What is your impression of the arrangement of the topics dealt with in this chapter?

- (b) Does the order of topics in Proverbs 16 remind you of anything?

“ . . . it is difficult to discern any strict order or logic in the way the topics are arranged . . . By presenting its material in this way, Proverbs mimics the very nature of life: life brings with it recurring responsibilities and choices, but often with no obvious order or pattern to them. But despite the apparent lack of order in its material, Proverbs still manages to convey the impression that life is not completely chaotic.” Pathway Bible Guide, The Art of Living by Bryson Smith pp 56-57.

6. Read Proverbs ch 16 again but this time sort the verses by deciding which are commands, advice, facts or reflections on an aspect of life.

“The one-sentence proverbs present their own peculiar problem because they are not laws given by direct revelation from God but rather are human observations from life’s experiences. Furthermore, the original context is not contained in the proverb and it has the deceptive appearance of a general rule. Therefore we must be careful not to use the proverbs as ready-made rules for living. I suspect, however, that many Christians approach them as if they were a detailing of the ethical content of the ten commandments. This is an understandable situation because alternative ways of looking at wisdom do not lie close to the manner in which twentieth-century westerners think. Perhaps we can begin to modify our thinking by considering the possibility that proverbs function not so much to give us a multitude of individual directions for right living, as to show us the way we go about learning wisdom.” Gospel and Wisdom by Graeme Goldsworthy p 76.

7. Read Proverbs 12:1. What do you think it means?

To finish

“Wise sayings, even the ones in the Bible, aren’t lucky charms, or morals, or even aspirins – and they’re certainly not laws! In other words stacking up a great pile of proverbs as memory verses isn’t the way to learn from biblical wisdom. Instead, we have to build our framework of biblical wisdom and then add to it from our own experiences as we interpret them in the light of that framework. I think that’s why some of the proverbs are so vague. For example, perhaps the numerical sayings like Proverbs 30:18-19 are meant to encourage us to add on our examples; or perhaps we should leave ones like 12:1 as they really are “loving knowledge, loving discipline, but hating correction, stupid” rather than add the translator’s words to make them ‘clearer’; or then again, perhaps we should record our own list of ‘like a . . . so is . . .’ and ‘better to . . . than to . . .’ comparisons like 16:8, 16, 19, 32.” From some unpublished notes by Mark Strom which became part of his book Days are Coming 1992, reprinted as The Symphony of Scripture 2001.

8. Read Proverbs 30:18-19. Can you add any examples from your own experiences?
9. Make up a proverb of your own of the form ‘like a . . . so is . . .’
or ‘better to . . . than to . . .’
10. How does knowing Jesus help us to understand the patterns and purposes of this world even when life seems so chaotic (read Eph 1:9-10, Col 1:15-20, 2:2-3)?

Study 6, The Lessons of Wisdom, Proverbs chs 10 – 29

One way to study Proverbs is to find proverbs which relate to specific topics. This study looks at the topics of wealth, words and work in chapters 10 to 29.

Getting started

1. (a) On which topics do you need guidance?

(b) Where do you find guidance on those topics if they are not dealt with in the Bible?

Light from the Word

Wealth

2. What attitudes should govern the earning of money according to the following proverbs?

Proverbs 12:11

Proverbs 13:11

Proverbs 28:20-22

3. How should we use our money according to the following proverbs?

Proverbs 11:24-26

Proverbs 19:17

Proverbs 22:9

4. How should we think about our money according to the following proverbs?

Proverbs 11:4, 18, 28

Proverbs 16:8, 16

Proverbs 23:4-5

5. Read 2 Cor 8:1-9.
- (a) In what sense was Jesus "rich"?
- (b) How did Jesus become "poor"?
- (c) What are the riches that Christians have because of Jesus?

Words

6. What is the importance of our words according to the following proverbs?
- Proverbs 11:9
- Proverbs 12:18
- Proverbs 15:4
7. How should we speak according to the following proverbs?
- Proverbs 10:19
- Proverbs 15:1-2
- Proverbs 16:23-24
8. How *shouldn't* we speak according to the following proverbs?
- Proverbs 16:28
- Proverbs 17:4, 9
- Proverbs 26:28
9. Read Matt 12:34-37 (Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees).
- (a) What has our heart got to do with the words we speak?
- (b) What has faith in Jesus got to do with the words we speak?

Work

10. What are the dangers of laziness according to the following proverbs?

Proverbs 14:23

Proverbs 19:15

Proverbs 20:4, 13

11. What are the benefits of hard work according to the following proverbs?

Proverbs 10:5

Proverbs 20:13

Proverbs 27:18, 23-27

12. In what manner should we work according to the following proverbs?

Proverbs 10:9, 16

Proverbs 11:1, 18

Proverbs 15:27

13. Read Eph 6:5-8. How does our faith in Jesus effect the way we work?

To finish

14. Is it enough to have good values and morals in how we use our wealth, words and work? Why/why not?

Study 7, The Search for Wisdom, Proverbs ch 30

Getting started

1. Think back to the time when God opened your heart to believe in Jesus. What did you begin to understand that you hadn't understood before? Also mention one piece of wisdom that you have come to understand as you have matured in your faith.

Light from the Word

2. Read Proverbs 30:1-3 (and read your Bible's footnotes for v1). What do we learn about Agur from these verses?

"There is a possibility that the Hebrew [for 'an oracle' in Prov 30:1] is a place name, Massa (see also 31:1), and that both Agur and Lemuel were Ishmaelites from a town of this name that is thought to have been in Arabia (see Gen 25:14)." From The Tree of Life Reading Proverbs Today by Graeme Goldsworthy p181.

"If Agur is, in fact, a Gentile searching for wisdom, this explains his statements in verses 2-3. As a Gentile, Agur would have lived without the benefit of God's revelation to Israel." Pathway Bible Guide, The Art of Living by Bryson Smith p 64.

3. Read Proverbs 30:4.

(a) What do you think is going on with Agur in this verse?

(b) What are the answers to Agur's questions?

(c) Jesus answers one of Agur's questions in John 3:12-13. What does Jesus mean by his answer?

4. Read 1 Cor 1:18-25

(a) What is wisdom in this passage?

(b) What is foolishness/folly in this passage?

(c) What do you think Agur would have made of this passage?

5. Read Proverbs 30:5-6.

(a) What do these verses say about God?

(b) What do these verses say about God's words?

(c) How do verses 5 and 6 fit in with what we have already learnt about Agur?

"The problem with the editorial sub-headings in the book of Proverbs is that they show where a section begins but not necessarily where it ends. For example, it is not clear that the ascription in 30:1 covers the whole of chapter 30." From The Tree of Life Reading Proverbs Today by Graeme Goldsworthy p 179.

"Our human trouble is that we are too proud, exalting ourselves, whereas (on one reading of this section), from his own example (2-3) and from his teaching (4-6), Agur urges a proper humility. At least, that is what he seems to be doing. Others take the declaration to be rather heavily sarcastic: 'There are people around who claim to know God perfectly; I am not in that class!' Verse 4 is paralleled in the later chapters of the book of Job, but ends with the ironic comment, 'Tell me if you know!'" From The Message of Proverbs by David Atkinson p 162.

"30:5-6 This statement appears to come from an Israelite who is thoroughly familiar with the law and the writings of the prophets. It is possible that an Israelite editor has inserted it as a response to the recognition of mystery in verses 3 to 4." From The Tree of Life Reading Proverbs Today by Graeme Goldsworthy p 182.

6. Some commentators suggest that there may be two speakers in Proverbs 30: one, an Israelite, and the other, Agur, an Ishmaelite and therefore a Gentile and unbeliever. The Pathway booklet says that there is one speaker, Agur, who finds wisdom in the Bible.

Read Proverbs 30:7-9. This is the only prayer in Proverbs.

(a) What is being asked?

(b) What does this tell us about the asker?

7. If Agur is the sole author then the rest of chapter 30 also comes from his hand.
Read Proverbs 30:10-33. Are there any pieces of wisdom here that seem particularly striking to you?

To finish

8. “Proverbs 30 provides us with a wonderful case study of a person who has only been able to make sense of life by coming to know the true and living God.” Pathway Bible Guide, The Art of Living by Bryson Smith p 65.

Would you say that Agur has come to have faith in God? Why/why not?

9. Changing direction in our search for wisdom (the title for this study) read Proverbs 3:5-6. What do you think this means in terms of our decision making?

“I think our pictures of life are far too often too much like eating fast food, or like living under the shadow of a rule book, or like staring glassy-eyed out into the third heaven waiting for ‘a word from the Lord’. Wisdom challenges all this: it says to us – warmly yet firmly – ‘grow up!’, ‘mature!’, ‘move beyond childhood into adulthood!’, ‘use the mind God has given you!’ Christian wisdom is the mind conforming to the gospel – it’s learning to apply the gospel to every area of our thinking and doing. We will always be tempted to take the ‘spiritual cop-out’ – you know, when we justify our ignorance and mental laziness by saying that we’re trusting the Lord. That’s not what Proverbs 3:5-6 is about. Rather it’s about diligently, carefully, prayerfully, intelligently and enthusiastically exploring life from the vantage point of the gospel. Hardly a cop-out – it’s a challenge!”
From some unpublished notes by Mark Strom.

10. What do you understand by the term “stepping out in faith”?
11. If you were to “step out in faith” where does wisdom stop and faith take over?

Study 8, Lady Wisdom, Proverbs ch 31:10-31

Getting started

1. This study is on the "wife of noble character" of Proverbs 31. If you have a spouse, what is one thing about him or her that is "excellent", as the ESV puts it, or "of noble character", as the NIV expresses it. (If you are not married you might like to answer this question by thinking about your mother.)

Light from the Word

2. Read Proverbs 31:10-31.

(a) How does this "wife of noble character" make you feel?

"This poem is in praise of the good wife, who exemplifies the principles of wisdom both in practical and spiritual terms. The demands of getting the poem into the alphabetical acrostic [each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, using the 22 letters in sequences] - no mean feat - may explain why there is no clear progression of thought. The general effect, though, is a coherent, if rather idealistic, description of a woman beautified by her wisdom in the practical matters of the home and family. The household in question appears to be quite well off, but this does not detract from the universal applicability of the principles of wifely wisdom." From The Tree of Life Reading Proverbs Today by Graeme Goldsworthy p 189

(b) What areas of life are *not* covered by this passage?

(c) Which parts of this passage reflect ancient Israelite culture?

(d) Which parts of this passage contain wisdom which is applicable to everyone?

(e) How does all this practical wisdom relate to the fear of the Lord?

To finish

3. How can we use this passage in our 21st century lives?

"Some people have the mistaken idea that the ideal woman in the Bible is retiring, servile, and entirely domestic. Not so! This woman is an excellent wife and mother. She is also a manufacturer, importer, manager, realtor, farmer, seamstress, upholsterer, and merchant. Her strength and dignity do not come from her amazing achievements, however. They are a result of her reverence for God. In our society where physical appearance counts for so much, it may surprise us to realise that her appearance is never mentioned. Her attractiveness comes entirely from her character.

The woman described in this chapter had outstanding abilities. Her family's social position is high. In fact, she may not be one woman at all – she may be a composite portrait of ideal womanhood.. Do not see her as a model to imitate in every detail; your days are not long enough to do everything she does! See her instead as an inspiration to all you can be. We can't be just like her, but we can learn from her industry, integrity, and resourcefulness." From Life Application Study Bible p 1131.

4. (a) From what you've read of Proverbs, before chapter 31, would you say male or female characters dominate the book? Why does one gender dominate the book?

(b) Why do you think Proverbs ends by exalting the virtues of a woman?

"At first sight it may seem forced to be suggesting that a poem about a wise woman testifies to Christ. We need, however, to remind ourselves that the teaching of Jesus is that the whole of the Scriptures testifies to him [Luke 24, John 5, 2 Cor 1]." The Tree of Life Reading Proverbs Today by Graeme Goldsworthy p 193.

5. How is this passage about Jesus?

"In New Testament terms, the wise woman of Proverbs 31 shows a specific example of redemption's effect on life. The fear of the Lord translates into faith in Christ. He is the true wisdom of God and of humankind. Being the wisdom of God, he implements the perfect plan of salvation that is bringing in the kingdom of God. Being the wisdom of humankind, he justifies our imperfect and often unbelieving wisdom so that we are no longer condemned for our failures and folly. We are thus set free in him to pursue the task of intellectual and practical sanctification." From The Tree of Life Reading Proverbs Today by Graeme Goldsworthy p 194.