

Proverbs: principles of wisdom, righteousness, and justice



by Jeffrey Kranz | Nov 26, 2013 | Bible Books

The new king Solomon became king, God came to him in a dream with a golden opportunity: “Ask what you wish Me to give you” (1 Ki 3:5).

He could have asked for long life, riches, or the deaths of his adversaries, but instead, he asks for wisdom (1 Ki 3:9). God was pleased with Solomon’s answer; it showed that the young king desired to lead His people with justice. The Lord grants Solomon’s request, and heaps upon him riches and honor to boot.

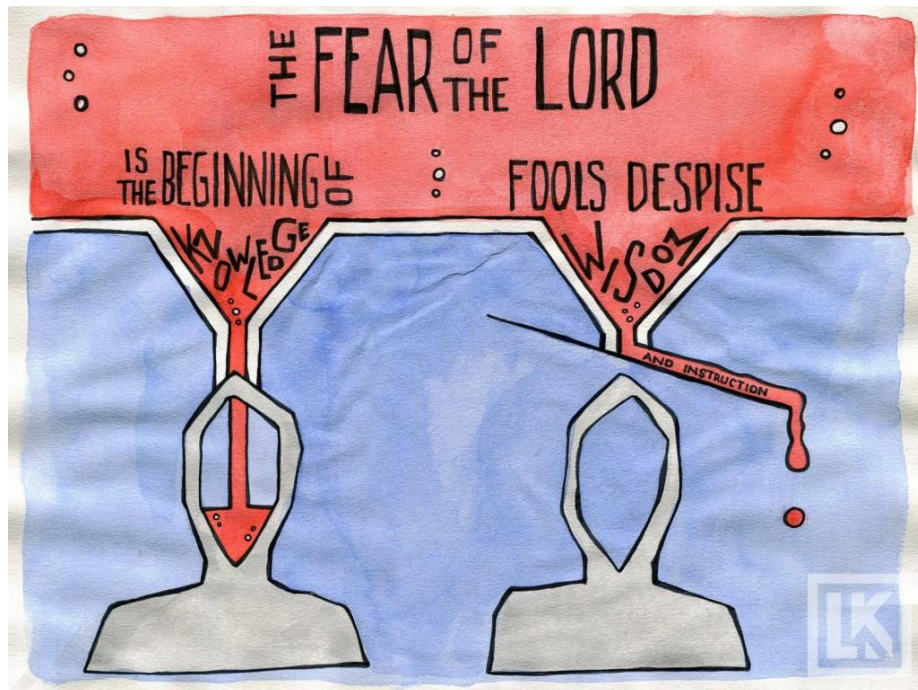
Solomon rules with wisdom and justice, and all Israel prospers (1 Ki 4:20, 25). The writer of First Kings gives us an idea of just how wise Solomon was:

Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even to the hyssop that grows on the wall; he spoke also of animals and birds and creeping things and fish. Men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom. (1 Ki 4:30, 32–34)

The book of Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings, many of which are attributed to Solomon. (Other wise folks chime in here and there.) Proverbs urges the reader to make decisions based on wisdom, justice, and righteousness (Pr 1:3). His sayings are sometimes direct instructions (Pr 1:10), sometimes general observations (Pr 20:14).

Key verse in Proverbs

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction." (Pr 1:7)



Proverbs' role in the Bible

Proverbs is a work of wisdom literature, and the third of the Old Testament books of poetry. The poetry of Proverbs takes several forms:

1. **Discourse.** The first nine chapters of Proverbs poetically argue the advantage of wisdom. This argument is progressively developed: wisdom is personified as a lady who cares for young men, rewards them, and protects them. If you've spent much time in the book of Job, this style will feel very familiar to you.
2. **Two-liners.** Once you're through the first nine chapters, two-liners dominate the book of Proverbs. These pithy sayings show similarity (Pr 26:17), contrast (Pr 10:7), and consequence (Pr 25:17). They were easy to remember and easy to apply.
3. **Lists.** These are some of my favorites. Part puzzle, part solution, these sayings bring a group of seemingly random observations and profoundly expose something they have in common.
Example: Proverbs 30:29–31.

4. **Acrostics.** Also great for memorizing (if you grew up learning Hebrew)! You've heard of the "Proverbs 31 woman"? That's actually an acrostic: each line in Proverbs 31:10–31 begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet.
5. **Extended sayings.** These are longer than two-liners, but don't nicely fall into the other categories. Example: Proverbs 30:7–9.

Though most of its text can be attributed to Solomon, the book does mention a few other contributors:

- Agur (Pr 30)
- Lemuel (Pr 31)
- "The wise" (Pr 22:17–24:34)
- Hezekiah's men transcribed some of Solomon's proverbs (Pr 25–29)

One trait that makes Proverbs an interesting book of the Bible is that not all of its text is given as absolute truth. The sayings in Proverbs are best interpreted as principles, not hard-and-fast laws about how God and the world work.

After all, not all righteous men are delivered from trouble (Pr 11:8), and not all who abuse their wealth come to poverty (Pr 22:16). These are observations that Solomon made, and they steer us toward godly living.

When you read and study Proverbs, remember that these sayings were guidelines intended to help people make wise, just, righteous decisions.

Quick outline of Proverbs

1. Choose wisdom! (1–9)
 - The excellence of wisdom (1–4)
 - Drawbacks of folly (5–7)
 - Wisdom calls (8–9)
2. Wisdom vs folly (10–18)
3. Life principles (19–24)
4. Wickedness, righteousness, and similarities (25–29)
5. Misc. advice (30–31)