

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth – let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

(Proverbs 1:1-7)

Introduction

Foundations are important. The Burj Khalifa in Dubai, at 828 metres high and with 163 floors above ground, is the tallest manmade structure in the world. It took a year to lay the foundations. There was 58,900 cubic yards of concrete, weighing more than 110,000 tons that went into the foundation. They say that the building is safe, because such care was taken in laying the foundation.

When it comes to the study of any book of the Bible, you would do well to understand its foundation. Only then will you enjoy a safe journey through the book. Proverbs 1:1-7 serves as an introduction—a foundation—to the book. In fact, everything that will be addressed, in principle, is contained in this introductory nutshell. Words like “wisdom” and “instruction” and “prudence” are found time and again in this book, and they are introduced for us in the opening section. The most foundational statement—the key to the entire book—is found in v. 7: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

Previously, we briefly considered an introduction to the theme of wisdom, but in this short study, we will begin to consider in a little more detail the introduction to the book. It will serve us well as we seek to understand the book as a whole to consider the themes set forth in this introduction. There are at least three major themes in these opening verses—the people of Proverbs, the purpose of Proverbs, and the principle of Proverbs—but we will consider only the first of these three in this study.

The People of Proverbs

According to vv. 4-6, Proverbs was written to two specific groups of people: the immature (v. 4) and the mature (vv. 5-6). Let’s consider each of these in turn.

The Immature

As we saw previously, Proverbs was written by “Solomon, son of David, king of Israel” (v. 1). The mention of the “king” is a covenantal hint. This is not simply a book of rules or moral dictates, but is a word about our relationship with God.

But the book was written “to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth” (v. 4). Many interpreters are convinced that the book of Proverbs was written primarily to young princes, who would assume the throne at some point in the future. But there is a wider audience, for the writer wants to offer wisdom to “the simple.”

Sometimes we use the word “simple” or “simpleton” in a pejorative way. That is not how Proverbs uses the book. The word means to be inexperienced or simpleminded, not in an intellectually negative way, but in the sense of being naïve. It speaks to those who are young. One of the audiences of Proverbs, then, are young people – those who are naïve about life, who need to be instructed how to live a life that is pleasing to the Lord.

The opposite of the simple person is the person who is prudent, who has more knowledge of the world than the person who is simple. But the simple person is in a far better position than the fool or the scorner, for he is teachable. Jesus said that the kingdom comprises those who are childlike (Matthew 19:13–15). He meant childlike in the sense of being teachable.

I have had the wonderful blessing in recent times of having my grandchildren in the home. One of the things I love about having them there is the opportunity to create and tell them stories – normally involving princesses and queens and pirates and dragons. The three children, of course, are the heroes of the story, and they protect the royalty from the dragons and the pirates. One day, they will realise that I am just making up stories, but for now they are very teachable and believe whatever grandpa tells them.

The writer here is addressing his words to those who are naïve and need to be taught. What Jesus said about Jesus in the kingdom applies to us who are older. There are still some areas in which we are naïve, and we must therefore be teachable. I always appreciate reading C. S. Lewis, in part because I get the impression that, as intelligent as he was, he was humble and teachable. Proverbs is written to such people – who realise that they need to learn.

Proverbs is geared to those who are immature. Are you a new believer? You can do little better than to immerse yourself in Proverbs. I always encourage people to read a chapter of Proverbs a day. There are 31 chapters – one for each day of a longer month. You will find tremendous value in reading the Proverbs consistently, praying, as one who is simple, that God will teach you wisdom and instruction.

The Mature

But there is a second audience here: “Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles” (vv. 5–6). Proverbs is directed not only at the simple, but also at the “wise.” As the writer will later say, “Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning” (9:9).

The promise is that the wiser we grow, the more we will be able to untangle some of the difficulties of life. And think, then, of how we can help others!

I hope it is true that, at 56, I am a wiser parent than I was at 25. I trust that it is true that I am a wiser spouse after 34 years of marriage than I was after one year. I remember a bachelor’s get-together with some friends a few days before I got married. I was waxing eloquent about what marriage is all about. A married man kept rolling his eyes at me and saying, “We’ll see!” You see, I had all the knowledge I could obtain from books on marriage, but I lacked the experience that this man had. That book knowledge was not worthless, but it has been fleshed out in my life over the last 34 years.

There is something in Proverbs for all of us: for those who are simple and naïve, and for those who have been walking with God for a long time and are far more mature in the faith. Whatever your status in life, there is wisdom in Proverbs for you. I don’t know whether or not you can teach an old dog new tricks (in our house, we can’t even teach a *young* dog new tricks!), but I do know that you can teach an old Christian additional wisdom. God says so!

May God bless our time as we continue to study the book of Proverbs in studies to come.

AMEN