

## Wisdom for Life: Pray for Wisdom

1 Kings 3:1-15

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on January 5, 2020

### Introduction

- ❖ I'm excited to start off this new year with a new series in the book of Proverbs. **If you've been with us for some time, you know that our practice at HCC is to preach through books of the Bible.** We try to cover whole books if we can, and we also try to alternate between Old and New Testament books. We just finished a series through the book of Colossians, so we wanted to start off the year in the Old Testament. And so we decided on Proverbs. Now we're not calling it a series *through* Proverbs because the plan is not to cover the entire book verse-by-verse like we did for Colossians. That would be quite audacious and probably beyond our ability as preachers. This, instead, is going to be a study of Proverbs.
  - Now the plan is to preach pretty much through chapters 1 through 9. There you'll find sustained discourses that lend to preaching them as whole chapters. But from chapters 10 and on, it's mostly individual proverbs – sometimes grouped together by a common theme – but there's really no apparent structure to organize them. They read like individual, standalone proverbs.
  
- ❖ And that's what is going to make this a good challenge each Sunday. **Because another distinctive to our preaching in this church is our approach of letting the main idea of each Sunday's passage to dominate and shape the main idea of the sermon.** That's what we call expository preaching. It's a text-driven approach to preaching, which is typically contrasted with topic-driven. **Topic-driven preaching** is where the preacher first chooses a topic that he wants to preach on, and then looks for verses that support what he wants to say about that topic. In the end, it could still be a very biblical sermon, so it's not wrong to preach this way. But the limitation of topic-driven preaching is that the teaching agenda of the pulpit is ultimately set by the preacher and what topics are currently dear to his heart or what issues he thinks the congregation needs to hear.
  - The benefit of **text-driven preaching** is that the teaching agenda is set by God as he has already laid out for us in each book of Scripture. When you just commit to preaching what's there in the next verse or chapter – and not picking and choosing every week – **then you'll inevitably touch on topics that you wouldn't have thought to cover or you'll be forced to deal with issues or controversies that you'd rather avoid.** And that's a good thing. Think about it: If "*all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching,*" (2 Tim 3:16), then the most beneficial thing for God's people is to expose them to the whole counsel of Scripture, as best you can.
  
- ❖ That's why we do what we do in this pulpit. But here is where Proverbs presents a challenge as well as a unique opportunity. If you take a look at a sermon pew card, you'll find a preview of all the messages we're going to preach in Proverbs, Lord-willing. **You'll notice that we're pretty much going to cover chapters 1 through 9 in a text-driven way. But then we've got twelve other sermons that are admittedly more topic-driven.** For each of those messages, we did choose a topic that we thought was pertinent, and then based on one anchor proverb – supported by other related ones – we'll unpack what Proverbs has to say about that topic. Making sure to set it in the context of the whole Bible and within the overall gospel story.

- ❖ So this series in Proverbs is going to give us a unique opportunity to hear a mix of text-driven and topic-driven sermons. We hope to show how a book like Proverbs can be still be preached in an expository, text-driven manner. **And at the same time, we want to demonstrate how to preach a proverb in a biblically responsible way that doesn't sound like we're just passing along a nugget of moralistic advice.**
  - Now you'll notice that this morning our text is from 1 Kings 3. We're not even preaching out of Proverbs. That's because we thought with a book like Proverbs – that genre-wise is so different from the OT narratives and NT letters that we typically preach – **it would be beneficial to preach an introductory sermon to the whole series.**
    - So I've got three main goals in this message. First, I want to help you get a handle on what kind of book you're reading. We're going to talk about the nature of a proverb and the right and wrong ways to read them. And then, I want to consider the author of Proverbs (or at least most of it). We're going to see why Solomon is qualified to write a book of proverbs, and why you can trust him as a competent source of wisdom. Lastly, we're going to talk about how one gets wisdom since it's something all of us desperately need.

### What Are Proverbs?

- ❖ So the first question we're going to ask is this: **What are proverbs and how should we read them?** The first step is to identify the literary genre of the book of Proverbs. Because until you know what type of literature you're reading, you won't know how to interpret it. This is rather obvious. **We instinctively know to read different types of literature differently.**
  - When you have a Dr. Seuss book in your hands, you know to read it differently than a cook book. You don't expect to literally cook green eggs and ham. This is all instinctive. When you read, "Once upon a time, in a land far away...", you prepare for one kind of reading. Which is different than if it started with, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." And both genres are very different from a reading that starts, "Many factors led to the American Revolution: among them are..."<sup>1</sup>
- ❖ So it goes without saying that we need to know what type of literature Proverbs is. It's Hebrew poetry. **The genre is called *proverbial poetry*.** A proverb is form of Hebrew poetry, which is different from English poetry. In English poetry, the distinguishing feature is the rhyming of words at the end of adjoining stanzas. "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall." We easily recognize that as poetry.
  - **But the key feature of Hebrew poetry is not the rhyming of words between stanzas but the developing of thoughts.** It's known as **parallelism**. It's where two stanzas are set in relation to each other. They might correspond, or they might contrast. However they relate, the key to interpreting Hebrew poetry is to identify the parallel and to respect how one stanza informs the other.

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<sup>1</sup>Dan Phillips, *God's Wisdom in Proverbs*. (Kress Biblical Resources, 2011), pg. 20.

- ❖ **Now another common feature of Hebrew poetry is the heavy use of imagery and word-pictures.** So your father's instruction and your mother's teaching can be described as a "*graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck.*" (1:8-9) Or a beautiful woman without discretion is described "*like a gold ring in a pig's snout.*" (11:22) **That kind of language doesn't just inform the mind – it fires the imagination.** Giving a young man a proverb like that will stick with him much longer than giving him a laundry list of qualities to look for in a wife.
  
- ❖ But all of that about parallelism and imagery would also be true if we were in Psalms. So what's distinct about a proverb that's different than a psalm? **A proverb is a compressed statement of wisdom that is artfully crafted to be both memorable and practical.**<sup>2</sup> It's where you take time-tested wisdom drawn from years of experience, and you compact it into a short, pithy statement that sticks. As one famous writer (Miguel Cervantes) once said, "*Proverbs are short sentences drawn from long experience.*"
  - **So because of its abbreviated nature, a proverb is *not* trying to say everything that can be said about a subject.** But like a bumper sticker or a witty T-shirt, whatever it does say, a proverb says artfully and memorably.
  
- ❖ **So the whole point is that you shouldn't read a proverb as an absolute statement or a blanket promise. They're more like general truisms.** They're not intended to be the final word on a subject. But whatever the subject is – they offer practical wisdom for life.
  - Let me give some examples. If you read **Proverbs 26:4**, it says, "*Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.*" But then in just the next verse it says the opposite, "*Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.*" (26:5)
    - So which is it? Do I answer a fool or not? Which command am I to obey? But that's the problem. We're reading them like commands. **If they were commands, then, yes, they would be contradictory. But they're proverbs.** The first proverb warns against adopting a fool's way of thinking. The second one advises you to use the fool's own folly to disarm him. So they don't work as commands. But proverbs work as proverbs – as general, practical truisms.
  
- ❖ Here's another example. **Proverbs 10:3** says, "*The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.*" Now if you read that as an absolute law, then you could disprove it easily with plenty of examples of righteous people who go hungry and wicked people who live full, satisfying lives. Does that mean this proverb isn't true? No, it just means you're not reading it as a proverb.
  - Or listen to **Proverbs 16:7**, "*When a man's ways please the LORD, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.*" If you take that as a blanket promise, it would imply that if you have relational conflict, then God must be displeased with you. If someone doesn't like you, then you must not be pleasing the Lord. It's always your fault. **Do you see the kind of damage that kind of interpretation can make?** And how would you explain the conflict Jesus faced? He had plenty of enemies. Did he fail to please God?

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<sup>2</sup>God's Wisdom in Proverbs, pg. 23.

- ❖ **Do you see how mistaken and harmful it can be if we don't know how to interpret and apply the proverbs?** "*Like a thorn that goes up into the hand of a drunkard is a proverb in the mouth of fools.*" That's **Proverbs 26:9**. It's saying a misinterpreted, misused proverb can be a real pain. It can cause a lot of hurt and damage. Like a thorn in your hand. That's why it's imperative that we learn how to properly read and use proverbs.
  - What is a proverb? I'll repeat it again: **A proverb is a compressed statement of wisdom that is artfully crafted to be both memorable and practical. They're not to be read as biblical commands, absolute laws, or blanket promises. They are general truisms that communicate practical wisdom for life.**

### Who Is The Author?

- ❖ So we've talked about how to categorize Proverbs and how to best read them and apply them to life. Now let's deal with authorship. Let's consider who wrote the book and why he's qualified to do so. In other words, why should we listen to him?
  - **The book begins by naming the author.** Chapter 1:1 starts with, "*The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.*" That's why we chose 1 Kings 3 for our text. Turn there with me. In case you're not familiar, the books of 1-2 Samuel are mainly about the story and rise of David, Israel's greatest king. The books of 1-2 Kings are about David's descendants and about how the kingdom eventually divided and crumbled.
    - Well, the first descendant is Solomon. He wasn't the next in line according to birth order. But he was the Lord's choice (1 Chr 22:9), so David passed the throne to him. Now David dies in 1 Kings 2:10, and the remainder of the chapter describes how Solomon secured his position as king.
- ❖ Here, in chapter 3, we get a portrayal of Solomon that's more complicated than the typical constructions of him being this good king, faithful to God in his younger years, and only, in his latter years, corrupted by his foreign wives. That's an oversimplification. That would only be the case if you skipped over vv1-2 and just start at v3 where it says, "*Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of David his father.*"
- ❖ But what vv1-3 together teach us is that **Solomon was a man of many loves**. On one hand, he's described as someone who loved the LORD. No one else in the book of Kings is described that way. He followed in the steps of his father David, who himself was a man after God's own heart. So it's clear that Solomon loved God.
  - Yet he also loved women. Lots of women. Especially foreign ones, like Pharaoh's daughter, whom he marries in v1. **Foreign women became the other great love of Solomon's life.** Listen to 1 Kings 11:1, "*Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh.*" So as special as v3 is – Solomon loved the LORD – yet the next time that word appears, it's about his love for many foreign women. He eventually ends up with 700 wives and 300 concubines (11:3). **Now just to be clear, the issue with him loving and marrying so many foreign women had nothing to do with race and everything to do with religion.** Solomon's foreign wives introduced him to foreign gods, which turned his heart from God, especially in the latter years of his life.

- ❖ But even here, in the beginning of his reign, we see hints of a conflicted heart. And it's not just his love of foreign women. **He also loved building his own house more than the house of the Lord.** He prioritized his palace over God's temple. It says in v1, "*He took Pharaoh's daughter and brought her into the city of David until he had finished building his own house and the house of the LORD and the wall around Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup>The people were sacrificing at the high places, however, because no house had yet been built for the name of the LORD.*"
  - That's a subtle rebuke of Solomon – for delaying the completion of the temple because he was preoccupied with building a palace for Pharaoh's daughter. **Because there was no permanent temple for the worship of the LORD, the Israelites resorted to high places.** Throughout the OT, high places were depicted as locations for idol worship. So because the temple was delayed, Solomon and all of Israel turned to the high places, which dangerously exposed them to foreign gods and foreign religious practices.
  
- ❖ As praiseworthy of Solomon as the rest of chapter 3 is, these first two verses are meant to criticize him. **That love for the LORD in v3 was not a wholehearted love.** It was divided. His heart was pulled in different directions. This is what makes Solomon a much more complicated character than typically portrayed. But it does make him a much more relatable character.
  - **Solomon is a man, who like us, is torn by conflicting loves.** I think we can relate to that. We love the Lord, and yet our hearts are so easily drawn away by other loves. Like Solomon, we're tempted by the inordinate love of money, of relationships, of sex, of our homes or cars or any other symbol of status and success. And just as these conflicting loves destroyed Solomon's spiritual leadership and divided his kingdom, they have the same power to destroy us.
    - What we need is what Solomon realized he needed. **When you have a divided heart – when you're plagued by conflicting loves – it's so hard to know what's the right thing to do in this or that situation.** So it's so hard to discern. What we need is wisdom.
  
- ❖ Solomon realized this. This is what else we learn about him. **Solomon was a man who needed and treasured wisdom.** If we keep reading in v5, we're told that the LORD appeared to him in a dream and gave him a blank check. He said, "*Ask what I shall give you.*"
  - This was a test – a very telling test. **How Solomon answered would reveal what's cherished in his heart – who or what he truly loves.** It's the most revealing of tests. Imagined being offered anything your heart desires. And imagine if the one who is offering has infinite powers and infinite resources to grant whatever you wish. Such a test is going to reveal your true character. How do you think you would answer?
  
- ❖ This is where Solomon is commended for how he answered. **In v6, he begins by acknowledging who God is and what he has done out of steadfast love.** Basically, he says, "You're the Sovereign One who established my father's throne and placed me on it, even though I'm undeserving." In v7, he says, "*you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in.*"

- ❖ He's not an actual child at this point. By the time he ascends the throne, his son Rehoboam was already born (cf. 2 Chr 12:13). **What Solomon means is that he feels very inexperienced and dependent on God – like how a little child depends on his parents.** And when he says he doesn't know how to go out or come in, he sounds like a little kid who has trouble opening the door. Now that expression is used elsewhere in reference to military leadership (Num 27:16-17; Deut 31:2-3), so Solomon's saying he doesn't know how to rule over a great army. And yet God has set him over this great people, "*too many to be numbered or counted for multitude.*" (v8).
- ❖ Do you see what Solomon is doing? He knows he needs wisdom. He's about to ask God for wisdom. But before he goes there in v9, for three verses he's praising God for all his sovereign power and sovereign grace. He's focused on who God is and what he has done for the undeserving. **He is basing his request in a healthy, righteous fear of the LORD.**
  - He's exemplifying one of his famous proverbs. "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.*" (Prov 9:10; 1:7) Here is a man who knows he needs wisdom. Who prays for wisdom. But roots that prayer in the fear of the LORD. He realizes that the resources and responsibilities in his life are God-given and admits that he's unequal to the task. That's what it looks like to ask for wisdom with a healthy fear of the LORD.
- ❖ Now look at the actual request in v9, "*Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?*" Solomon prays for an "*understanding mind*". **Literally, he's asking for a listening heart.** Now in the Bible, the heart is the control center of a person. Your heart is the seat of – not just your emotions – but of your intellect and your will (your obedience).
  - **So a listening heart is a heart that is primed to hear and obey.** That's what distinguishes biblical wisdom from mere knowledge or comprehension. **Wisdom is meant to be applied.** Solomon needed wisdom to govern this great people – to discern between good and evil, right and wrong, when faced with difficult decisions. He needed a wise and discerning mind – a listening heart.
- ❖ God is so pleased that Solomon asked for this. That he didn't ask for gifts to serve himself. He didn't ask for long life or riches or vengeance against his enemies. So in vv11-14, God grants him wisdom that surpasses everyone else. **He makes Solomon the wisest man on earth.** That's why he's qualified to write this book. That's why you should listen to him. There's no one wiser.
  - Listen to **1 Kings 4:29**, "*29And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, 30so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. 31For he was wiser than all other men.*"
    - We're told that he wrote 3,000 proverbs and penned 1,005 songs – on a variety of subjects. And all the kings of the earth would travel to Jerusalem to come and hear the wisdom of Solomon (4:32-34; 10:23-24). He was the wisest man on earth.

- ❖ If you look back v13, God said because you treasured wisdom above all else, I will entrust to you what you didn't ask for. I'll give you both riches and honor and will lengthen your days if you walk in my ways. **Solomon, now that you have wisdom, I can trust you with these things.**
  - Friends, that's an important observation. **Once you have wisdom, that's when God is willing to entrust you with more.** So often we're praying for our health or for our finances or for justice –for all sorts of things. And most of which we pray for is not necessarily bad or selfish. But one thing we can glean from this is that we should be praying for wisdom first and foremost. Perhaps God is waiting for us to gain wisdom before he entrusts us with more.
- ❖ **So let's pray for wisdom like Solomon.** Let's borrow v9 and pray as well for an understanding mind and for discernment between good and evil. Now yes, I know Solomon's situation is unique to him. We don't have God appearing to us in a dream, offering a blank check.
  - So yes, it would be presumptuous to think that God will grant us whatever we wish. But we can say, with confidence, that God is ready to grant us Solomon's wish and give us wisdom if we ask. **James 1:5**, *"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him."* We just need to ask him.

### How Do We Get Wisdom?

- ❖ Let's end with one final question: **What is wisdom and how do we get it?** We've already mentioned that wisdom is not limited to merely possessing intellectual knowledge. Wisdom has to do with knowing what to do with that information and doing it.
  - **So just knowing a whole bunch of facts about a subject might make you knowledgeable about that subject – but you're not necessarily wise in it.** A six-hundred pound man might be knowledgeable in the subjects of dieting and exercise. He could ace a test on it. But he wouldn't be considered wise in it.
    - In the same way, you can be knowledgeable in the Bible or in theology. You could ace a test or tear it up in bible trivia. **But unless your life is being reshaped and re-formed by that knowledge, then you're not yet wise in the things of God.**
- ❖ Interestingly enough, the Hebrew word for "wisdom" used throughout Proverbs is translated as "skill" in **Exodus 28:3** – where it describes the skill of tabernacle workers, of artisans. And also in **Ezekiel 27:8** to describe the skill of sailors.
  - That means the biblical concept of wisdom is more like a skill. **According to Proverbs, you could say that wisdom is having the skill for living in the fear of the LORD** (1:7; 9:10). To be biblically wise means you know how a healthy fear of the LORD affects and directs our daily lives. It means you have the skill (and the will) to apply that healthy fear to your relationships, your speech, your finances, your work, your parenting, etc.
- ❖ **Solomon's wise counsel is for you to develop this skill – to get wisdom.** Proverbs 4:7, *"The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight."* Now we just said that, to get wisdom, you've got to pray for it. God is the one who ultimately grants us wisdom.

- ❖ **But we also get wisdom by digging in the Scriptures.** If you just look prior to our passage, at 1 Kings 2:2-4, David's last words to his son was a charge to stay in God's Word and to keep it. If you want to be a good king, this is what you have to do. David learned this from Scripture. It says, in **Deuteronomy 17:18-19**, that every king of Israel is required to write out a copy of the Law for himself, for his own study. "*He shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God.*"
  - **So Solomon learned the fear of the LORD – which is the beginning of wisdom – by closely studying Scripture like his father.** Friends, there's really no short cut. No one has ever grown in biblical wisdom apart from a committed reading and studying of God's Word. And that's what we want to get out of this series in Proverbs. We're getting into the Word so we can get wisdom.
  
- ❖ But, in the end, you can read the Bible everyday, cover to cover. But that alone is not enough to make you biblically wise. **Wisdom that comes from God is obtained – not merely through a routine like Bible reading – but through a relationship with a real person.**
  - The wisdom that comes from God – which Solomon wrote 3,000 proverbs about – was one day embodied in a real person. **It's as if wisdom stepped out of the book of Proverbs and into the person of Jesus Christ.**
    - According to Matthew 12:42, with the coming of Christ, something greater than Solomon has arrived. Solomon was the wisest man on earth. But Jesus is infinitely wiser. He is the wisdom of God in the flesh (1 Cor 1:30).
  
- ❖ So Scripture is essential for wisdom. **But 2 Timothy 3:15 says Scripture is able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ.** A relationship with Jesus through trusting in him. That's the first step to getting wisdom. Without a relationship with Jesus, Proverbs will read to you like an ancient book of wise sayings no different than the writings of Confucius. But through faith in Christ, Proverbs is able to make you wise for salvation with the wisdom of God.
  - **And as you take that step of faith, just be aware that God's wisdom in Christ is not always going to make sense to the world.** Just as the cross of Christ was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, don't expect biblical wisdom to always align with the world (1 Cor 1:23).
    - Biblical wisdom looks like a life of self-denial, of self-sacrifice, of cross-bearing – forgiving your debtors, loving your enemies, not seeking vengeance but entrusting final justice into the hands of God. Biblical wisdom is not the wisdom of this world, but it's the wisdom you'll need for life – for eternal life with Christ.