

"WHAT IS THE HEART OF PROVERBS"
(The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook)
(Danny Hays)

The purpose of the book of Proverbs is expressed clearly in the opening verses: "for attaining wisdom and discipline [,] . . . doing what is right and just and fair" (1:2-3); and for teaching both the simple or young as well as the wise and discerning (1:4-5). The book of Proverbs is tied theologically to the Old Testament by 1:7: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge," thus underpinning the search for wise living to obedience before God.

Proverbs at its core is about building character. It provides guidelines for right and wise character development. It stresses that character produces behavior and that behavior produces serious consequences.

As mentioned above in our introduction to the Wisdom Books (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs), Proverbs presents the norms of life—things that are generally and normally true, things that one should build their character around. For example, Proverbs teaches that by working hard, one will prosper and do well. This is normally true, and a hard-work ethic is certainly a foundational virtue that will help one to live wisely. But this is not universally true; neither is it an unqualified promise from God. There are exceptions to this in life, as Job aptly illustrates. There are modern exceptions as well. For example, in the mid-1980s there was a terrible drought and famine in Ethiopia. Thousands of godly Christian farmers were affected by the drought and devastated by the famine. These people were not lazy; they were hardworking, as hardworking as any in the world. Hard work was still a good character virtue for them to embrace, but the consequences of that proverbial truth did not apply to them due to their unique situation. It is normally true, not universally true.

So Proverbs presents the norms of life, and the other books (Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs) focus on the exceptions. All the Wisdom Books need to be taken together to balance one another. Proverbs without Job can lead to incorrect practical theology, as Job's three friends illustrate. Part of becoming truly and biblically wise is learning how to apply the various proverbial teachings in the book of Proverbs to the differing contexts of life.

Because the maxims in Proverbs are normally true, most of the time we can apply the majority of them to our lives quite easily. The book of Proverbs deals with the most basic aspects of life: family, neighbors, work, speech, society, and so on. Out of this day-to-day living in the real world" context, several central themes emerge from Proverbs: wisdom versus folly; improper aspects of speech (anger, gossip, etc.); spouses and families (including sexual immorality); laziness versus hard work; proper attitudes toward the poor; and the righteous versus the wicked.

One of the ways that Proverbs teaches wisdom is through its portrayal of four basic character types. First there is the *simple* (or *naive*). This person is not too smart and doesn't want to be. Second is the *fool*. He is not smart either, but thinks he is and has convinced the *simple/naive* one that he is. Third is the *scoffer* or *mocker*. He is actually very smart (in human terms), but he does not fear the Lord, thus his intelligence does not translate into true wisdom, and he becomes a bitter skeptic. The fourth character type portrayed in Proverbs is the *wise*, who is smart and discerning, but who also fears the Lord. The central teaching in Proverbs is the exhortation to us to strive to become like the *wise*, and not like the *simple*, the *fool*, or the *scoffer*.

