Wisdom Literature

Saturday 4th July 2026

Teaching by Tim Cooling

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Aim of the Session:

To explore how the three wisdom books of the OT teach us to live faithfully in a world ordered by wisdom, twisted by sin and marked by mystery.

Understand how to begin to engage with Wisdom Literature as a literary genre.
Understand the key themes that Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job raise.
Cultivate a longing for wisdom that will draw you further into these amazing texts.

Session Structure

Three movements:
The World of Wisdom – Proverbs 1-9.
The Dialogue of Wisdom – Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Job in Conversation
Jesus and Wisdom

“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”

Proverbs 4:23

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THE WORLD OF WISDOM

Mashal מָשָׁל

A proverb is a nugget of wisdom, forged through life-experience, condensed into a simple form.

Mashal includes Poetry, songs, parables, metaphors, discourses, dramatised instruction, personification & personas.
Proverbs is a diverse compilation of artistic writing.

STRUCTURE OF PROVERBS

1-9 A series of lessons from a father to son. Includes the appearance of lady wisdom.
10-22:16 Proverbs of Solomon
22:17-24:22 Words of the Wise
24:23-34 Further sayings of the Wise
25-29 Proverbs of Solomon transcribed by Hezekiah's men.
30 Words of Agur
31:1-9 Words of Lemuel. An oracle of King Lemuel about ruling taught to him by his mother.
31:10-31 Woman of Valour. An alphabetic acrostic poem. From Aleph to Tav (The Hebrew A – Z).

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FORM OF PROVERBS

LINE A By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted.
LINE B But by the mouth of the wicked it is overthrown.
Proverbs 10:11

SMALL PORTION – BIG FLAVOURS
LINE A A soft answer turns away wrath,
LINE B But a harsh word stirs up anger.
Proverbs 15:11

A short proverb opens up a whole range of themes.
The power of speech, the nature of anger, the importance of personal restraint, escalation and de-escalation, and peacemaking.

METAPHOR/SIMILE

LINE A A word fitly spoken
LINE B Is like apples of gold in settings of silver.
Proverbs 25:11

LINE A Like a dog returns to his vomit
LINE B Is a fool who repeats his folly.
Proverbs 26:11

PARALLELISM

Antithetical – B contrasts with A
LINE A A wise son makes a glad father,
LINE B But a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother.
Proverbs 10:1

Synonymous – B mirrors A
LINE A The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;
LINE B By understanding he established the heavens.
Proverbs 3:19

Developmental – B develops A
LINE A The name of the Lord is a strong tower;
LINE B The righteous man runs into it and is safe.
Proverbs 18:10

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CONTEXTUAL PROVERBS

LINE A Answer not a fool according to his folly
LINE B Lest you be like him yourself.
Proverbs 26:4

LINE A Answer a fool according to his folly
LINE B Lest he be wise in his own eyes.
Proverbs 26:5

26:4 says hold your counsel so you don't get dragged into futile conversations and foolish interactions.

26:5 says challenge a fool according to his foolishness or else he will go away thinking he is wise.

Proverbs aren't universal truths.
They are wise principles that need skilful application to particular situations.

Other examples would be:
20:3 & 27:5
10:4 & 23:4

DANGER OF PROVERBS

LINE A Like the useless legs of one who is lame
LINE B Is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.
Proverbs 26:7

A proverb in a fools mouth cannot fulfil its function and offers no benefits.

LINE A Like a thornbush in a drunkard's hand
LINE B Isa a proverb in the mouth of a fool.
Proverbs 26:9

A thornbush is something that will cause harm.
A drunkard is someone who is out of control, who lacks discernment. They do not possess the capacity to wield what is in their hand.

There is two sides of the equation. First, the proverb offers wisdom, but it is only useful and beneficial in the hands of someone who possesses wisdom. In the hands of a fool it can cause harm.

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REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

How might the following proverbs be harmful when wielded by a fool?

10:4 A slack hand causes poverty; but the hand of the diligent makes rich.
22:6 Train a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.

The danger of proverbs is that we can mistake wise principles for universal truths. We can take a simplistic approach to Proverbs, "if God said it, I believe it". Such an approach can cause harm when we do not recognise the need for wise application.

Remember DIVINE INSPIRATION ISN'T LIMITED TO WHAT IS WRITTEN IN PROVERBS, BUT HOW IT IS WRITTEN.

We need to interpret Proverbs on its own terms as Wisdom Literature.

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THE GOAL OF PROVERBS: BECOMING WISE

It is not enough for us to intellectually understand the meaning of a Proverb. We need to become wise to truly reap their benefits. Proverbs 1-9 are a collection of lessons that seek to form us into the kind of person who can handle Proverbs wisely.

It does this by immersing our hearts and imaginations in the world of wisdom.

- The Nature of Wisdom 1:1-6
- The Foundation of Wisdom 1:7; 9:10
- The Nature of the World 8:22-31
- The Source of Wisdom 2:6-10
- The Intimacy of Wisdom 1:20-23; 7:4-5; 9:1-6
- The Orientation of Our Desires

NATURE OF WISDOM
Proverbs 1:1-7
Wisdom includes:

- Instruction
- Insight
- Wise dealings
- Righteousness
- Justice & Equity
- Prudence
- Discretion
- Knowledge & Understanding
-

Derek Kidner, Proverbs.

"We should do Proverbs a poor service if we contrived to vest it in a priestly ephod or a prophet's mantle, for it is a book that rarely takes you to church. Like its own figure of Wisdom, it calls across the street about some everyday matter, or point things out at home. **Its function in scripture is to put godliness into working clothes**…."

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FOUNDATION OF WISDOM

Fear of the Lord is one of the major threads that runs through all the wisdom books. In Proverbs, the fear of the Lord is essential for wisdom, and is the disposition of heart that births wisdom in our lives.

FEAR is the Hebrew word Yirah. It describes an awe-filled reverence that may include terror or dread. It describes when the magnitude of God becomes real to our hearts.

> *Dallas Willard*.
>
> "Our commitment to Jesus can stand on no other foundation than a recognition that he is the one who knows the truth about our lives and our universe. **It is not possible to trust Jesus, or anyone else, in matters where we do not believe him to be competent.** We cannot pray for his help and rely on his collaboration in dealing with real-life matters we suspect might defeat his knowledge or abilities." Divine Conspiracy, 107.

THE NATURE OF THE WORLD
Proverbs 8:22-31

"then I was beside him like a master workman,
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the children of man." 8:30-31

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Proverbs 8 shapes our imagination to perceive the world differently.
Wisdom belonged to God before the foundation of the world. She was part of the creative process – a master workman.
The world is not just a product of God's power, but of His wisdom.
His wisdom is intricately woven into the fabric of creation. What this means is that God has ordered the world so that we flourish when we live according to His ways.

Therefore, Proverbs has two paths:

1. The path of wisdom that leads to life
2. The path of folly that leads to ruin.

It is like wisdom is the Operating System of the cosmos and certain inputs will produce certain outcomes.
Sin is described as folly because to resist God's ways is to resist God's creative order and so crash against the rocks of reality.

SOURCE OF WISDOM

Hear, my son, your father's instruction,
And forsake not your mother's teaching,
for they are a graceful garland for your head
And pendants for your neck. 1:8-9

Who we are attached to will determine whether we receive wisdom or not.

In fact wisdom is personified in the book of Proverbs to help us understand the relational and intimate nature of wisdom.

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We first meet Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1.

Wisdom cries aloud in the street,
in the markets she raises her voice;
21 at the head of the noisy streets she cries out;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
22 "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge? 1:20-22

Lady Wisdom is:

- Invitational
- Truthful 8:6-8
- An aid to rulers 8:15-16
- Responsive to affection 8:17
- She is lifegiving 8:35
- She gives her Spirit 1:23
- She prepares her home for us 9:1-6

Wisdom is personal, relational, invitational, eager for us to know her. She has prepared her home for us and put a feast out for us to enjoy.

Wisdom arrives through relational attachment.
"Say to wisdom, "You are my sister,"
And call insight your intimate friend."
Proverbs 7:4-5

Lady Folly (9:13-18) is very similar to Lady wisdom. She is invitational, she allures the simple with seductive pleasure and deceptive words. In many ways she looks like lady Wisdom, she promises to satisfy desires, she invites us to her home, she makes the same invitation "whoever is simple let him turn in here".

Yet the fate of those who make their home with her is to enter Sheol – the realm of the dead.

"I have come to realize, for instance, that wisdom is more than a skill for living; it has profound theological significance. After all, it begins with the fear of God (1:7). Or to put it another way, wisdom involves making Woman Wisdom an integral, intimate part of our life (9:1–6)."

Tremper Longman III, Proverbs, 15.

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Lady wisdom possesses qualities usually associated with God Himself.

- She gives the Spirit.
- She is eternal.
- She is full of truth and righteousness and hates wickedness.
- She gives life.
- She will enter your heart

To attach ourselves to wisdom, is to attach ourselves to God. All wisdom comes from Him.

For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;
7 he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
he is a shield to those who walk in integrity,
8 guarding the paths of justice
and watching over the way of his saints.
9 Then you will understand righteousness and justice
and equity, every good path;
10 for wisdom will come into your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; 2:6-10

To become wise we must be relationally attached to wisdom and ultimately God. She is to be a close friend, we are to make our home with her, she is to enter our hearts.

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ORIENTATION OF OUR DESIRES

It is hard to read Proverbs 1-9 without having your desires reoriented towards wisdom.
James K A Smith says that "to be human is to be a lover." We are what we love, what we long for, what we desire most.

The writer of the Proverbs goes to great lengths to show us how precious and desirable wisdom is. It is woven into every lesson so that we become the kinds of people who yearn for God's wisdom.

In the first 9 chapters of Proverbs we are told that wisdom:

- Is more valuable than wealth, hidden treasures and precious jewels 2:4-5; 3:14,15; 8:10, 19.
- Gives long life, favour, peace and healing for your soul and flesh. 1:33; 3:2, 16, 22; 4:20-22; 8:35; 9:1
- Gives protection and security 2:7, 11, 12, 16-19; 4:5-6; 6:20-24.
- Grants peace and freedom from fear and disaster. 1:33; 3:17, 23, 24, 26.
- Forms character and discernment 1:1-6; 2:9-10; 4:23; 5:1-2
- Gives honour, dignity and beauty 1:8-9; 3:22, 35; 4:8-9.
- Enables fruitful leadership and a just society 2:9; 8:15-20.
- Brings flourishing and provision 3:4, 7-10; 8:18, 21.

Anne Stewart says Proverbs shapes our "emotions, motivations, desires and imagination."

It contrasts this with folly that is framed as undesirable.

- The wicked lie in wait for their own blood, they set a trap for themselves. 1:18-19
- The adulterous woman's house sinks down into death 2:18-19
- The way of the wicked is deep darkness, they do not know over what they stumble. 4:19
- The Lord's curse is on the house of the wicked. 3:33
- Lady Folly's home is the realm of the dead.

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THE DIALOGUE OF WISDOM

INTRODUCING ECCLESIASTES

Qoheleth meaning Preacher or Teacher. Originates from the word Qahal meaning to assemble or gather.
Ekklesia in Greek means gathering or assembly.

This is the gathered reflections of a wise teacher who wants to invite us (God's people) to wrestle with the perplexities of life "under the sun".

It is helpful to think of Ecclesiastes as an ongoing conversation with Proverbs. Ecclesiastes "stress-tests" the claims of Proverbs through the lived experience of the teacher.

"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." 1:2 ESV

Or another translation says:

"Meaningless! Meaningless! Says the Teacher.
"Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless." 1:2 (NIV

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HEVEL הֶבֶל
A smoky haze or vapour.

Conveys a word image.
If life is a smoky vapour it is:
Transient/temporary – will pass quickly.
Elusive – hard to grasp, control or manipulate.
Frustrating – doesn't behave in a predictable way.
Hazy – hard to see through or unclear.

PROVERBS – claims that there is a moral order to God's world. He has woven his wisdom into the fabric of creation. A wise life will be fruitful and a foolish life will lead to ruin.

ECCLESIASTES – danger of possessing an overly-simplistic mechanical view of reality. From underneath the sun, God's order and wisdom can be hard to see, life can appear fleeting, unpredictable and beyond our control. Life is more poetry than machinery.

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PROVERBS CLAIM 1 – Wisdom leads to life, blessing and security

ECCLESIASTES REFLECTION

13 I saw that wisdom is better than folly,
just as light is better than darkness.
14 The wise have eyes in their heads,
while the fool walks in the darkness;
but I came to realize
that the same fate overtakes them both.
15 Then I said to myself,
“The fate of the fool will overtake me also.
What then do I gain by being wise?”
I said to myself,
“This too is meaningless.”
16 For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered;
the days have already come when both have been forgotten.
Like the fool, the wise too must die!” 1:13-16

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PROVERBS CLAIM 2 - Righteousness leads to flourishing while the wicked will come to ruin.

ECCLESIASTES REFLECTION

“In my vain (Hevel) life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing. Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?”

Error 1 – A prideful arrogance that wisdom will help you master life and its outcomes.
Error 2 – A nihilistic foolishness “I can’t control the outcomes, I may as well live foolishly.

Wisdom is a good thing. But it does not give us mastery over our lives. It does not turn us into gods. Righteousness still matters, even when life doesn’t turn out the way you’d hoped. Foolishness can still do harm. The fear of the Lord delivers us from both errors so that we can adopt a humble reverence to live faithfully without overreaching.

Other examples:
Hard work brings profit, but toil can become Hevel. You can work hard not because you are wise, but because you are driven by envy, which is Hevel. You can work hard and leave a legacy, but your legacy may be inherited by a fool, which is Hevel.

Wisdom grants knowledge, but so much of life remains unknowable. Even when a wise man toils to seek out knowledge, some things are beyond his reach, hidden from view, unsolved mysteries.

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ECCLESIASTES isn't a cynical or hopeless book.

It concludes
"The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.[c] 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, with[d] every secret thing, whether good or evil."

It is not that the wisdom of Proverbs is false, it is that wisdom is not a mechanism for controlling life. Instead, fear of the Lord leads to a place of humility where you can recognise life is confusing and hold its mysteries without being crushed by them.

INTRODUCING JOB

Job begins like Proverbs. A blameless man who is flourishing in life.
But then Proverbial expectations are subverted. He suffers because he is blameless.

The three friends of JOB are examples of how knowledge of Proverbs, without the possession of wisdom, can do great harm.

ELIPHAZ; The innocent do not perish – you must be guilty to suffer.
"Remember: who that was innocent ever perished?
Or where were the upright cut off?
As I have seen, those who plough iniquity
and sow trouble reap the same." Job 4:7-8

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BILDAD: God does not turn away from the blameless.
"Does God pervert justice?
Or does the almighty pervert the right?
If your children have sinned against him,
he has delivered them into the hand of their transgression." 8:3-4

Bildad, fuelled by his understanding of wisdom says something unimaginably cruel. "Your children must have died because of their sin."

ZOPHAR: Hidden sin requires repentance.
"Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves." 11:6
Think about what that means. However great your suffering has been, it is nothing compared to what you truly deserve.

Then he offers a formula for restoration.
"If you prepare your heart,
you will stretch out your hands toward him…
then surely you will life up your face without blemish;
you will be secure and will not fear." 11:13-15

All three friends use the information of Proverbs, without the Spirit of wisdom. Supposedly wisdom was coming out of their mouths, but wisdom had not entered their hearts. They think they offer the light of insight, but serve only to deepen Job's darkness.

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JOB POINTS OUT HOW PAINFUL THERE WISDOM IS
“Miserable comforters are you all.” Job 16:2
“How long will you torment me and break me in pieces with words?” Job 19:2

GOD CONFIRMS THEIR VERDICT IS WRONG
“My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” 42:7

THE CONCLUSION OF JOB
Job has wrestled with God.
Chapter 3 – Why was I born? (only to suffer)
Chapter 7 – Why are you targeting me?
Chapter 10 – Why did you make me only to destroy me?
Chapter 13 – Why did you hide your face?
Chapter 23 – Where can I find you and present my case?
Chapter 30-31 – Why do you not answer me?

In all of it he does not sin, because in the anguish and confusion he brings his case to God.

God responds to Job’s questioning:

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
3 Dress for action[a] like a man;
I will question you, and you make it known to me.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?”
” Job 38:2-4

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Job's suffering is answered not with God unravelling the mystery of suffering, but with Job encountering the magnitude of God.

"I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."
Job 42:3

"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you."
Job 42:5

PROVERBS – Wisdom helps you align your life with the way God has ordered his world so that you can flourish.
ECCLESIASTES – Wisdom does not turn you into a master of life where you can determine the outcomes.
JOB – Wisdom does not give you mastery over life's mysteries, such knowledge is too wonderful.

Fear of the Lord produces in us a humility to live faithfully, trusting in God, even when life is mysterious to us, and the outcomes of life are confusing.

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JESUS AND WISDOM

Jesus is revealed as:

- Wisdom embodied
- The Wisdom Teacher
- The Righteous Sufferer
- Wisdom's Vindication

18 For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who [a]are perishing, but to us who [b]are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
And the understanding of those who have understanding, I will confound."

20 Where is the wise person? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not *come to* know God, God [c]was pleased through the foolishness of the [d]message preached to save those who believe. 22 For indeed Jews ask for [e]signs and Greeks search for wisdom; 23 but we preach [f]Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than mankind, and the weakness of God is stronger than mankind. 1 Corinthians 1:18-25