

Reading Proverbs...

The next Old Testament book in our SAPC reading challenge, which we began last week, is Proverbs. It may be helpful to have a quick introduction and overview as we proceed. To do so, we will briefly look at five main questions.

First, what is ‘wisdom’? As we discussed in our reading through Job, true wisdom comes from God, not from this world, nor from any independent human enterprise. According to Scripture, it involves a practical, applied knowledge in relation to God. Contrary to popular misconceptions, it is primarily ethical in nature. In fact, James describes such wisdom ‘from above’ as godly character (James 3:17-18). It is more about growing in godliness than gaining facts.

Second, what is a ‘proverb’? A proverb is a true principle that depends on the right time and circumstance (i.e. a proverb presupposes the right circumstance for its proper application—for example, see Prov 26:4-5). A wise person knows the right time and situation for the right application of a proverb. That said, a proverb is not a promise or absolute law that is detached from circumstance.

Third, is there a structure or flow to the book of Proverbs? While there is some debate, we can generally detect a basic structure. Chapters 1-9 serve as an introduction and lens through which the rest of the book can be read and understood (with 1:7 as the main theme). It contains an extended discourse about two ways or paths (the path of wisdom and the path of folly). Interestingly, the two ways are personified as women who are extending invitations to embrace and dine with them, as two competing devotions or loves. Chapters 10-31 contain short proverbs which speak to a number of different topics and themes. Note that the book of Proverbs also uses the poetic device of ‘parallelism’ (as in the Psalms, etc.). In this Hebraic poetic device, the second line carries forward or sharpens the idea of the first line, forcing the reader to ask, ‘what is the relationship between the two lines?’

Fourth, how does it speak of Christ? In Scripture, Christ’s wisdom is highlighted in a number of ways. He is the embodiment of the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:30; Col 2:3). He is greater than the wisdom of Solomon, which is directly linked to the book of Proverbs (Lk 11:29-32). His work on the cross displays the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24). His wisdom was justified by His deeds (Matt 11:18-19—note that Jesus says, that “wisdom is justified by her deeds,” using the female personification of wisdom akin to Proverbs 1-9). In short, Jesus is the embodiment of the true wisdom of God, involving thought, word, and deed.

Lastly, what is its message for us today? While there are many specific applications to be made throughout Proverbs, we daily face both invitations—to wisdom and to folly. Whom will we follow and embrace, Jesus or the Devil / world? Will we live according to wisdom from above or from below? There is no neutral ground. How will you respond today, in the midst of your current circumstance?

Keep reading!

Jason Hunt

Reading Proverbs: *From Cliché to Conviction*

Throughout Proverbs, but especially in the second half of the book, we encounter a number of verses which speak about the *sovereignty and providence of God*. Here are some examples:

^{ESV} **Proverbs 16:1** The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.

^{ESV} **Proverbs 16:9** The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.

^{ESV} **Proverbs 16:33** The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.

^{ESV} **Proverbs 19:21** Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.

^{ESV} **Proverbs 21:1** The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.

^{ESV} **Proverbs 21:30** No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the LORD.
³¹ The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the LORD.

In different ways, all the above passages remind us that God is in control and is working out his purposes, right on schedule. There is great encouragement here, especially in light of what is going on in the world today. However, my fear is that verses like these, at least in practice, become cliché sayings or sentiments which can be recited without faith. Remember that these are not things that man came up with to make himself feel better, like on some hallmark card or inspirational poster. They are the words of God and should not be used as clichés. Rather, they should be words of *conviction* for us. They should not be words we throw out (like, 'this too shall pass' or something similar) as a knee-jerk response to our circumstances, while our hearts drift in unbelief, wondering if such things are really true. Rather, they are what we know to be true—our starting point, from which we interpret everything else.

So, the next time you recite the truth of God's sovereignty and perfect providence, ask yourself: *am I thinking or saying this as a cliché or as a conviction?* Let us examine our hearts in this so that we may more fully rest in our Father's sovereign hand.

Keep reading!

Jason Hunt