



Good News
Bible Reading Program

A free educational service provided by the United Church of God, *an International Association*

— August–September 2006 —

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
30-31 Aug	Introduction to Proverbs Part 1	Proverbs 1:1-7
1-2 Sept	Introduction to Proverbs Part 2	Proverbs 1:1-7
3-4 Sept	Introduction to Proverbs Part 3	Proverbs 1:1-7
5-6 Sept	First exhortation: Avoid bad company; First appeal of wisdom: Warning to the heedless	Proverbs 1:8-33
7-8 Sept	Second exhortation: The value of wisdom and the right versus wrong path	Proverbs 2
9-10 Sept	Third exhortation: Look to God and find true wealth and security	Proverbs 3
11-12 Sept	Fourth exhortation: Wisdom is supreme; Keep to the right path	Proverbs 4
13-14 Sept	Fifth exhortation: Sex is only for marriage	Proverbs 5
15-16 Sept	Four teachings: Avoid legal entanglement, laziness and the ways of scoundrels; Sixth exhortation: Warning against adultery	Proverbs 6
17-18 Sept	Seventh exhortation: Avoid the crafty temptress	Proverbs 7
19-23 Sept	<i>Preparation for and observance of the Feast of Trumpets</i>	No assigned verses
24-25 Sept	Second appeal of wisdom: Wisdom's call; Wisdom's value; Wisdom in creation	Proverbs 8
26-27 Sept	Two appeals: Woman Wisdom versus Woman Folly	Proverbs 9
28 Sept–21 Oct	<i>Preparation for and observance of the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles</i>	No assigned verses

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Highlights to Think About From This Month's Reading

Introduction to Proverbs (Proverbs 1:1-7)

August 30-31

Second, following Psalms, in the Hebrew arrangement of the Writings section of the Old Testament is the premier example of wisdom literature in Scripture—the book of Proverbs. The Hebrew title of the book, based on the first verse, is *Mishle Shelomoh*, “Proverbs of Solomon.” The Greek title used in the Septuagint is a translation of this: *Paroimiai Salomontos*. As we will consider further, the Greek word here is also the word for “parables.” The Latin title, *Liber Proverbiorum*, brings us closer to the English title we use today. The early rabbinical writings called Proverbs *Sepher Hokhmah*, “Book of Wisdom,” after its principal subject.

Just what is a proverb? In modern parlance the word denotes a memorable short saying summarizing a time-tested truth—also known as an aphorism, adage, maxim, epigram or byword. One commentator explains: “Proverbs are pithy statements that summarize in a few choice words practical truths relating to some aspect of everyday life. The Spanish novelist Cervantes defined a proverb as ‘a short sentence based on long experience.’ From a literary point of view, that isn’t a bad definition. Some people think that our English word *proverb* comes from the Latin *proverbium*, which means ‘a set of words put forth,’ or, ‘a saying supporting a point.’ Or, it may come from the Latin *pro* (‘instead of,’ ‘on behalf of’) and *verba* (‘words’); that is, a short statement that takes the place of many words. The proverb ‘Short reckonings make long friendships’ comes across with more power than a lecture on forgiving your friends” (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Skillful: An Old Testament Study—Proverbs: Tapping God’s Guidebook to Fulfillment*, 2004, p. 14).

Yet we should take care here to note that the Hebrew word translated “proverb,” *mashal* (for which *mishle* is the plural), is considerably broader than this. It corresponds to our idea of a proverb, a popular short saying, in some passages (see 1 Samuel 10:12; 24:13). Yet it can also refer to a prophetic discourse (see Numbers 23:7, 18), a taunt (see Isaiah 14:4; Micah 2:4; Habakkuk 2:6), a parable or allegory (see Ezekiel 17:2; 20:49; 24:3-5), or the longer discourse sections in Job (see Job 27:1; 29:1). The basic meaning of the Hebrew word *mashal* is “comparison,” “similarity” or “parallel.” Many of the short sayings in the book of Proverbs are comparisons or contrasts (see 11:22; 25:25; 26:6-9). Sometimes these are presented with the word “better” (see 15:16-17; 16:19, 32; 17:1; 19:1). But we should recognize that, unlike the latter part of the book, chapters 1–9 consist not mainly of short sayings but of lengthier discourses. Nevertheless, rather powerful metaphoric imagery is employed in these opening chapters—with wisdom and folly personified as two very different women. Such metaphoric discourses could perhaps fall within the meaning of the Hebrew term *mashal*. It may be that the general idea is illustrative sayings—which would include all of the above. Yet in the book of Proverbs, the meaning may more specifically refer to the compact sayings—as the section heading in 10:1 (following the introductory chapters 1–9) seems to commence the proverbs of Solomon without an “also” as in 25:1 (though some argue that this is because chapters 1-9 were a later addition, which seems unlikely).

As wisdom literature, the proverbs here have a didactic or instructive purpose (see 1:1-7)—these being “the words of the wise” (1:6). Indeed, there were three classes of teachers in ancient Israel. Note Jeremiah 18:18: “Then they said, ‘Come and let us devise plans against Jeremiah; for the *law* shall not perish from the *priest*, nor *counsel* from the *wise*, nor the *word* from the *prophet*.’” Also Ezekiel 7:26: “Then they will seek a *vision* from a *prophet*; but the *law* will perish from the *priest*, and *counsel* from the *elders*.” Besides the priests who taught the people God’s law and the prophets who communicated special messages from God, the people also learned from the “wise” or “elders” who gave them counsel on applying God’s principles and navigating their way through life. The seal of divine approval on such wisdom was its harmony with God’s laws and prophetic scriptures. Of course, in the case of the book of Proverbs, there is no question as to its divine warrant since it is now clearly part of the Bible, God’s Word. Yet even when compiled, the wisdom of its human author was known to have come from God.

In 1 Kings 3, we read how King Solomon received his great wisdom. When chosen to succeed his father David as king, Solomon humbly asked God to grant him wisdom so that he might be a good king in governing God’s people Israel: “Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?”

(verse 9). God was very pleased with Solomon’s humble and serving attitude. Notice His response: “Behold, I have done according to your words; see, I have given you a wise and understanding heart, so that there has not been anyone like you before you, nor shall any like you arise after you” (verse 12). Later in 1 Kings 4 we read: “And God gave Solomon wisdom and exceedingly great understanding and largeness of heart like the sand on the seashore. Thus Solomon’s wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the men of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men...and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs, and his songs were one thousand and five.... And men of all nations, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom, came to hear the wisdom of Solomon” (verses 29-34).

The fact that Solomon *spoke* 3,000 proverbs does not mean that all originated with him. No doubt many were his creations. But others he collected, perhaps even from surrounding cultures, and some he edited and compiled into this written set. As we are told in the book of Ecclesiastes: “Because the Preacher [most likely Solomon] was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes, he *pondered* and *sought out* and *set in order* many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find acceptable words; and what was written was upright—words of truth” (12:9-10). Some think Solomon’s plunge into uncontrolled polygamy and later idolatry disqualifies him from having written the book of Proverbs. But clearly God inspired his great wisdom and what he wrote—despite Solomon’s eventual choices to ignore what he knew to be right. Indeed, considering the other biblical testimony here, who better than Solomon to have put together the premier wisdom text?

Solomon’s name appears at the beginning of three sections of the book of Proverbs: in 1:1 at the beginning of chapters 1–9; in 10:1 at the beginning of 10:1–22:16; and in 25:1 at the beginning of chapters 25–29. Let’s note the parts of the book in order of arrangement:

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|----------------|--|
| 1. 1:1-7 | Title and Purpose Statement |
| 2. 1:8–9:18 | Prologue (father’s exhortative discourses, wisdom personified) |
| 3. 10:1–22:16 | Proverbs of Solomon (Major Collection) |
| 4. 22:17–24:22 | Words of the Wise |
| 5. 24:23-34 | Further Words of the Wise |
| 6. 25:1–29:27 | Further Proverbs of Solomon (Hezekiah’s Collection) |
| 7. 30:1-33 | Words of Agur |
| 8. 31:1-9 | Words of King Lemuel From His Mother |
| 9. 31:10-31 | Epilogue (Virtuous Wife) |

(Sometimes section 1 above is referred to as a prologue and section 2 is called an introduction. Others reverse these designations. And still others apply both terms to both sections together. It is true that both are really part of the same section, so that sections 1 and 2 could be assigned the same number. Also, sections 8 and 9 are often grouped together, given that 9, the book’s epilogue, has no separate attribution. This would yield a total of seven sections, corresponding to the distinct attribution at the beginning of each. Still, the authorship of the epilogue is uncertain.)

Many argue that the attribution to Solomon in 1:1 concerns the whole work rather than specifically chapters 1–9. This seems likely, since, as mentioned earlier, 10:1 does not have the word “also” like 25:1 does. However, that could be because 10:1 begins the section of compact proverbial sayings in contrast to the preceding longer discourses. As further noted earlier, some claim that chapters 1–9 constitute a later addition to the book of Proverbs written by someone other than Solomon. Yet the attribution to Solomon in 1:1 would then seem rather odd—not applying to any material for nine chapters. Thus, even though the title in 1:1 probably refers to the book as a whole, the absence of any other attribution at the beginning of chapters 1–9 most reasonably implies that Solomon is the one behind this lengthy prologue or introduction.

Out of the large number of proverbs Solomon spoke, he selected for the book of Proverbs’ core collection bearing his name (10:1–22:16) the comparatively small number of 375 (one proverb per verse/line). Interestingly, this number corresponds to the numerical value of Solomon’s name. His name in Hebrew, *Shelomoh*, is written with four Hebrew consonants, each of which corresponds to a number: *shin* (300) + *lamed* (30) + *mem* (40) + *he* (5) = 375.

A later collection of Solomonic proverbs (Proverbs 25–29) was added by “the men of Hezekiah king of Judah” (25:1). Hezekiah, a righteous king, directed this work—perhaps with the guidance of the prophets who were contemporary with him, Isaiah and Micah. We are not told where these were copied from, but it may have been from a book mentioned in 1 Kings 11:41: “Now the rest of the acts of Solomon, all that he did, *and his wisdom*, are they not written in *the book of the acts of Solomon?*” Some contend that the number of proverbs in this section (which is not always one per verse) likewise corresponds to the numerical value of Hezekiah’s name. His name is variously spelled, but in Proverbs 25:1 the form is *Hzyh*: *heth* (8) + *zayin* (7) + *qoph* (100) + *yod* (10) + *he* (5) = 130. The exact number of proverbs in this section is not clear, as some may be conjoined, but this number is perhaps possible. It is certainly close. Some contend that Hezekiah’s name, as in other passages, should be counted with a preceding *yod* (valued at 10), yielding a total of 140—and they argue that there are 140 verse lines in this collection that should be counted instead of literary units or sayings.

We do not know when the other collections in the book were included—these being the two from the “wise” (22:17–24:22; 24:23–34) and that of Agur (30:1–33) and of Lemuel (31:1–9), of which, as noted above, the epilogue about the virtuous wife (31:10–31) may or may not be part. Since none of these sections include a note about scribal copying like the Hezekiah collection, it may be that these others were all part of Solomon’s original compilation. As for Agur and Lemuel, we do not know who they are. Some consider these names to be pseudonyms for Solomon, but this is not provable and seems unlikely given the other clear attributions. We will further consider this matter later.

Other numerical factors may have guided the final editorial work on the book. As commentator Patrick Skehan notes: “The title in Prov 1:1 alleges ‘Proverbs of Solomon (375), son of David ($d = 4 + w = 6 + d = 4$, or 14 in all), king of Israel.’ Now since *Ysr’l* has the numerical value ($y = 10 + s = 300 + r = 200 + ’ = 1 + l = 30$) 541, the names in Prov 1:1 have a value of $375 + 14 + 541$, or 930, the number of lines in the book” (*Studies in Israelite Poetry and Wisdom*, The Catholic Biblical Quarterly—Monograph Series I, 1971, p. 44). The same commentator argues that the book is constructed as the “house of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:1), arranged in a numeric pattern corresponding to the temple of Solomon. “Skehan’s theory is intriguing, but most scholars remain unconvinced of its validity. Its very complexity and the peculiar way some passages are combined give the theory a contrived look” (*New American Commentary*, introduction to Proverbs, p. 48). Time and space limitations prevent further examination of this idea here.

Parallels From Egypt and Mesopotamia (Proverbs 1:1–7)

September 1–2

Agreeing with an early compilation by Solomon himself, respected scholar Kenneth Kitchen’s structural analysis of Proverbs “indicates that the Book of Solomon (Prov 1–24) was written as a unified text at the beginning of the first millennium B.C. Even apart from that work, however, the older criteria for dating the sections of Proverbs are inappropriate. The lengthy wisdom discourses and the personification of wisdom in Prov 1–9, once regarded as proofs of the late origin of those chapters, are now acknowledged to be paralleled in Egyptian literature” (*NAC*, p. 51). Indeed, there are a number of parallels in the book of Proverbs with similar wisdom literature in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.

There are good reasons to give some consideration to this fact and take a look at such literature. As *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* explains in its introduction to Proverbs: “This literary background is helpful to understanding the biblical book. First, it provides help in understanding the forms of wisdom literature—proverbs, maxims, fables, riddles, allegories, and instructions. Second, it indicates the antiquity of the forms used in the Bible, especially Proverbs 1–9, which was once considered to be the latest form. But it now can be demonstrated that the literary proverb of two lines may be as old as the Sumerian proverbs, and that collected instructions may be as ancient as the Old Kingdom of Egypt.” Of course, such wisdom literature was based on human observation in a pagan setting without divine sanction. Yet some elements of this literature were valid and may have, through God’s direction, been edited to fit in the collection of the book of Proverbs, as we will see. On the other hand, the biblical proverbs may also have influenced foreign literature. We will consider these issues after briefly taking note of some of the foreign wisdom instruction.

Old Kingdom Egypt gives us “the ‘Instruction of Kagemni’ and the ‘Instruction of Ptah-hotep’ (2450 B.C. [?]), which advise the proper decorum for a court official. Like Proverbs, Ptah-hotep counsels on persuasive speech: ‘Good speech is more hidden than the emerald, but it may be found with maidservants

at the grindstones’.... He further warns against going after a woman like a fool, for ‘one attains death through knowing her’” (same note). The same work says: “When you are guest at the table of one who is greater than you then take what he gives you, as they serve it before you. Do not look at what lies before him, but always look only at what lies before you” (compare Proverbs 23:1).

Also from the Egyptian Old Kingdom, “the ‘Instruction of Merikare’ (2160-2040 B.C.) records a monarch’s advice for his son on the wise qualities needed by a king, including this saying: ‘The tongue is a sword...and speech is more valorous than any fighting’” (*Expositor’s*, introduction to Proverbs).

From the Egyptian New Kingdom we have the “Instructions of Anii.” “Like the book of Proverbs, Anii: • exhorts readers to avoid beer drinking and warns about the disgrace of public drunkenness (see Pr 20:1). • asserts that an individual should avoid the company of brawlers and violent men (see v. 3). • advises against taking vengeance, urging the reader instead to seek divine help (cf. v. 22). • warns the reader to stay away from the ‘strange woman,’ the prostitute or adulteress (vv. [16; 22:14;] 23[:27]-35)” (“The Instructions of Anii,” *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, sidebar on Proverbs 20, p. 990).

From early Mesopotamia comes the “Instruction of Shuruppak” (ca. 2000 B.C.), which “records the advice of a king to his son Ziusudra, the hero of the flood in the Sumerian version. For example, it says, ‘My son, let me give you instructions, may you pay attention to them,’ and ‘{My} son, do not sit {alone} in a {chamber} with someone’s wife.’ The ‘Counsels of Wisdom’ (c. 1500-1000 B.C.) are a collection of moral exhortations about avoiding bad company and careless speech, being kind to the needy, and living in harmony with one’s neighbor and in loyalty to the king. For example, it says, ‘Do not return evil to your adversary; Requite with kindness the one who does evil to you, / Maintain justice for your enemy’” (*Expositor’s*, introduction to Proverbs).

Solomon may well have studied such literature, given the cosmopolitan nature of his kingdom and his renowned pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. Considering his royal education and position as king, he likely was able to speak and read the languages of surrounding kingdoms. Scripture, as we’ve seen, even mentions the wisdom of the East and of Egypt, which was surpassed by Solomon (see 1 Kings 4:30; compare Daniel 1:4, 17, 20). Solomon was closely allied to Egypt, being married to the pharaoh’s daughter. Many Egyptian cultural influences have been discovered in archaeological finds in Jerusalem dating to Solomon’s time.

Some later works in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt could reflect earlier wisdom in nations that Solomon borrowed from. On the other hand, these works could just as easily reflect wisdom that came to some extent *from* Solomon—as his wisdom was famous throughout the Middle East during his reign. “The ‘Words of Ahiqar’ (700-670 B.C.) is a collection of proverbs, riddles, short fables, and religious observations by a court official for the Assyrian kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon, giving advice on disciplining children, guarding the tongue, respecting secrets, and being circumspect in dealing with the king. For example, it says, ‘Withhold not thy son from the rod’ (...cf. Prov 13:24); and ‘I have lifted sand, and I have carried salt; but there is naught which is heavier than {grief}’ (...cf. Prov 27:3)” (same note).

And from later in Egypt there is the “Instruction of Ankhsheshonqy” (ca. 400-300 B.C.), “a large collection of about five hundred sayings and precepts like those in the Book of Proverbs that reflect the practical and religious concerns of the community. But they do not have the poetic parallelism characteristic of Hebrew proverbs. For example, their instructions include: ‘Do not go to your brother if you are in trouble, go to your friend’ (cf. Prov 27:10); and ‘Better {to have} a statue for a son than a fool’ (cf. Prov 17:21)” (same note).

The strongest parallels with the book of Proverbs are to be found in the Egyptian New Kingdom “Instruction of Amenemope” (sometimes written as Amen-em-opet). A number of its statements correspond closely to the “Sayings of the Wise” in Proverbs 22:17–23:11. “For example, the instructions include these: ‘Do not associate to thyself the heated man, / Nor visit him for conversation’ (...cf. Prov 22:24); ‘Do not strain to seek an excess, / When thy needs are safe for thee. / If riches are brought to thee by robbery.... / (Or) they have made themselves wings like geese / And are flown away to the heavens’ (...cf. Prov 23:4-5)” (same note). The latter parallel is uncanny. Proverbs 23:4-5 says: “Do not overwork to be rich.... Will you set your eyes on that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away like an eagle toward heaven.” We will examine further parallels with Amenemope later. There is some debate over who influenced whom here. Most scholars take Amenemope to predate

Solomon, in which case Solomon could have borrowed from the Egyptian work—though the Egyptian work could just as well have drawn on earlier Hebrew wisdom that Solomon also borrowed from. However, some argue that Amenemope was composed later than Solomon.

We should realize that borrowing or editing some sayings in use at the time does not signal approval of surrounding cultures—nor does it take away from the inspiration of Solomon’s work. As commentator Tremper Longman points out: “Study of the similarities between the advice given in the biblical book and ancient Near Eastern wisdom...makes concrete what we read in 1 Kings 4, that the sages of Israel lived and studied in an international context. It is always dicey to be dogmatic about specific borrowings, but there is little doubt that Israel’s wise teachers read, understood, adapted, and appropriated the wisdom of their (pagan!) neighbors. Does this tell us something about how we should view our own, non-Christian culture, as well as other cultures worldwide? Many Christians react strongly against today’s culture and the literature it produces—reading only Christian literature, going only to Christian schools, avoiding movies, and so forth. Certainly the prophets of Israel issued important warnings about the seductive power of pagan culture. The sages, though, are the counterbalance. They are a model of thoughtful observers, reflecting on the world around them [just as the apostle Paul later quoted from pagan literature to make certain points]. Perhaps we should be better observers ourselves. Though the sages observed and appropriated, they never simply or uncritically borrowed ideas from the broader cultural setting. Rather they adapted them to their own religious values.... If sages observed a truth in Egyptian wisdom, they understood it to be a truth of Yahweh” (*How to Read Proverbs*, 2002, p. 77).

And *Expositor’s* notes: “Whatever the Spirit of God inspired the ancient writers to include became a part of the Word of the Lord. Such inclusions then took on a new and greater meaning when they formed part of Scripture; in a word, they became authoritative and binding, part of the communication of the divine will” (introduction to Proverbs).

Indeed, such wisdom was not left to stand on its own but was placed in subordination to the fact that true knowledge and wisdom begin with the fear of the Lord (see 1:7; 9:10). “The words ‘The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge’ (1:7) set the record straight, so to speak. This is the foundation on which all other wise sayings stand. It is the Book of Proverbs’ central idea: Fear of the Lord motivates us to obey God’s commandments, and obedience to them constitutes true wisdom” (*The Nelson Study Bible*, introduction to Proverbs). Indeed, 1:7, which concludes the purpose statement of the book and commences the introductory instruction, is the very first sentence proverb or compact saying in the book—contrasting the way to right knowledge through godly fear with the choice of fools to reject wisdom and instruction. (Compared to later sections of the book, the first nine chapters constituting the introduction contain relatively few such maxims.)

“To Know Wisdom and Instruction” (Proverbs 1:1-7)

September 3-4

Just what is wisdom? The book of Proverbs was written so that others would know it (1:2). “Descriptions of wisdom take different shape in different Old Testament contexts. In some, wisdom is knowledge related to a technical skill—for example, Bezalel’s skill in crafting artistic designs with silver and gold, stone, and wood (Ex. 31:3). In other contexts, wisdom refers more to general knowledge learned from experience, especially from observation of the creation—for example, the lowly ant models diligence and foresight (Prov. 6:6-8). In general, we can say that wisdom involves knowing what to do in a given situation; skill in crafts or skill in living well both require that a person has learned how to ‘do the right thing’” (Paul Koptak, *The NIV Application Commentary: Proverbs*, 2003, introduction to Proverbs, pp. 38-39).

Wisdom in the book of Proverbs generally signifies moral discernment between righteousness and evil as well as skill in the proper conduct of the business of life. Wisdom implies the correct *application* of knowledge and understanding. *The New Open Bible* states in its introduction to the book: “The words ‘wisdom’ and ‘instruction’ in 1:2 complement each other because *wisdom* (*hokhmah*) means ‘skill’ and *instruction* (*musar* [the noun form of *yasar*]) means ‘discipline’ [or ‘correction’]. No skill is perfected without discipline.... Proverbs deals with the most fundamental skill of all: practical righteousness before God in every area of life.”

There are other frequently occurring Hebrew terms we should note up front:

bin – understanding (intellectual ability to discern truth and error)
da'at – knowledge (possession of factual information)
skal – wise perception and dealing (being insightful or successful)
mezimma – discretion (discernment to differentiate the right way to proceed)
'orma – prudence (ability to reason through situations)
leqakh – learning (the root means to grasp or acquire, here mentally)
tachbullah – counsel (the root means to steer a ship, thus guidance to direct one's life)
peti – simple (uninformed, immature, aimless, naïve, gullible)
kesil – fool (evil but also an individual who rejects obvious truth and despises wise words)
lason – scorner (individual who seeks to make trouble for others)

The book of Proverbs is all about navigating between right and wrong choices. “Proverbs, if nothing else, zeroes in on the choices we face, and in recommending one way over another, it describes the kind of persons we can become and ought to be.... The proverbs do not give directions for what to do in every situation; instead, they present the qualities of character that guide us in the many decisions we will face in life” (*NIV Application Commentary*, introduction to Proverbs, p. 46).

The book is particularly geared to young people so they may learn from the experiences of others recorded here—but valuable and useful for *everyone*. “According to the prologue (1:1-7), Proverbs was written to give ‘prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young’ (1:4), and to make the wise even wiser (1:5). The frequent references to ‘my son(s)’ (1:8, 10; 2:1; 3:1; 4:1; 5:1) emphasize instructing the young and guiding them in a way of life that yields rewarding ends” (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, introduction to Proverbs). “In the final analysis,” notes commentator Longman, “the book of Proverbs is for everyone—but with one notable exception. The fool is excluded. Perhaps it would be better to say that fools exclude themselves.... The final verse of the prologue [i.e., of the opening purpose statement] (Prov 1:7) gives what has been called the motto of the book: ‘The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.’... By definition, fools cannot participate in wisdom because they reject God” (p. 20).

The same commentator further explains that the metaphoric imagery presented in the lengthy introduction of the book necessitates that a young man be the one addressed: “In summary, Proverbs 1–9 teaches that there are two paths: one that is right and leads to life, and one that is wrong and leads to death. The son is walking the path of life, and the father and Wisdom are warning him of the dangers he will encounter as well as the encouragement he will find.... Traps, snares, stumbling, enemies on the dark side; God on the side of life. But the most important people encountered along the way—and this explains why we need to understand that the addressee is a man—are two women: Woman Wisdom and the dark figure of Woman Folly” (p. 27).

Likewise, the *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* points out: “In the initial cycle of instruction (1:8–9:18) the writer urges the young man to choose the way of wisdom (that leads to life) and shun the ways of folly (that, however tempting they may be, lead to death). The author chooses two prime exemplifications of folly to give concreteness to his exhortations: (1) to get ahead in the world by exploiting (even oppressing) others rather than by diligent and honest labor; and (2) to find sexual pleasure outside the bonds and responsibilities of marriage. Temptation to the one comes from the young man’s male peers (1:10-19); temptation to the other comes from the adulterous woman (ch. 5; 6:20-35; ch. 7). Together, these two temptations illustrate the pervasiveness and power of the allurements to folly that the young man will face in life and must be prepared to resist.... The second especially functions here as illustrative and emblematic of the appeal of Lady Folly” (introduction to Proverbs). Understanding the figurative parallels here, it is clear that women can profit from the instruction given in this introduction as well.

The opening discourses are “strikingly organized. Beginning (1:8-33) and ending (chs. 8–9) with direct enticements and appeals, the main body of the discourses is made up of two nicely balanced sections, one devoted to the commendation of wisdom (chs. 2–4) and the other to warnings against folly (chs. 5–7)” (*ibid.*). *Expositor’s* notes that “this section runs in cycles: the purpose of Proverbs is to give wisdom (2:1–4:27), but folly may prevent one from seeking it (5:1–6:19); there are advantages to finding wisdom (6:20–9:12), but folly may prevent this too (9:13-18)” (introduction to Proverbs).

Following the introduction, chapter 10 commences the concentration of short sentence proverbs forming the main collections of the book—there being only few such aphorisms scattered throughout the introductory discourses (the first being 1:7, as we’ve seen). When we reach chapter 10 in our reading, we will note the various forms of these proverbs.

There is a clear relation, we should observe, between Proverbs and the law of God—as Proverbs affirms the wisdom of keeping God’s law and the folly of breaking or ignoring it. This sometimes comes in the form of direct commands in the proverbs, these being a form of instruction. For example, Deuteronomy says, “You shall not remove your neighbor’s landmark” (19:14) and “cursed is the one who moves his neighbor’s landmark” (27:17). Likewise, Proverbs says, “Do not remove the ancient landmark” (22:28; 23:10). At other times the relationship is more illustrative. The Fifth Commandment says, “Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16). Proverbs states, “A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is the grief of his mother” (10:1). The Eighth Commandment says, “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15; Deuteronomy 5:19). Proverbs states, “Ill-gotten treasures are of no value; but righteousness delivers from death” (10:2, NIV). Of course, the desired conduct is still clear. Such is the nature of wisdom literature.

The NIV Application Commentary says: “One might go a little farther and say that experience and observation together persuade the wise of the truth of *torah* [God’s law or teaching]. It is *torah* tested in the crucible of experience, and one can draw from that crucible examples of how wisdom works in real life. Examples of wisdom in Proverbs, but also in Job, Ecclesiastes, a number of the psalms, and perhaps even the Song of Songs, join together to say: See, this way of life works—sometimes in ways we did not expect (see Job and Ecclesiastes)—and one need not be afraid to bring the teaching of *torah* to experience to be tested by it. In wisdom literature the rule of God described in the *torah* takes on personal suffering (Job), the contradictions of life (Ecclesiastes), and the presence of evil in this world (Proverbs) and affirms that God’s instructions can be trusted. Experience ultimately will not contradict them” (pp. 39-41).

The mechanics of these principles leading to positive or negative outcomes may involve God’s direct intervention or simply follow a natural course. *The New American Commentary* points out: “Regarding the relationship between wisdom and the Torah, one must compare first of all the teaching of Proverbs on retribution with that found in Deuteronomy. Both strongly emphasize the concepts of retribution and reward. In both, just or right activity produces life and peace, whereas evil deeds end in self-destruction. On the other hand, in Deuteronomy the rewards or retributions come directly from the hand of God as he deals with his people according to the terms of the covenant. Proverbs, however, views the respective benefits and sorrows of good and evil not so much as direct acts of God as the natural and almost automatic results of certain actions” (pp. 25-26).

On this note we should realize that Proverbs does not support the misguided theology held by Job’s friends in the book of Job—the idea that physical blessings in life are proof of righteousness and suffering is proof of sinfulness. It may seem that way from numerous short sayings—or even that the sayings are contradictory, since some show the righteous living well and some show the sinful living well for the time being. The same commentary properly notes: “Proverbs does not support the often alleged maxim that the Israelites believed that the rich are righteous and favored by God but the poor are sinners and under his punishment. This assessment is a poor caricature of biblical wisdom. The problem here is not with the Bible but with our failure to grasp the hermeneutics [interpretive methods] of wisdom literature. By its very nature and purpose, wisdom emphasizes the general truth over some specific cases and, being a work of instruction, frames its teachings in short, pithy statements without excessive qualification. It is not that the wisdom writers did not know that life was complex and full of exceptions, but dwelling on those cases would have distracted attention from their didactic [i.e., teaching] purposes. It is general truth that those who fear God and live with diligence and integrity will have lives that are prosperous and peaceful but that those who are lazy and untrustworthy ultimately destroy themselves. And general truths are the stock in trade of Proverbs” (p. 57).

Commentator Wiersbe further notes: “Hebrew proverbs are generalized statements of what is usually true in life, and they must not be treated like promises. ‘A friend loves at all times’ (Prov. 17:17, NKJV), but sometimes even the most devoted friends may have disagreements [or fail to have proper care for one another]. ‘A soft answer turns away wrath’ (15:1, NKJV) in most instances, but our Lord’s lamblike

gentleness didn't deliver Him from shame and suffering. The assurance of life for the obedient is given often (3:2, 22; 4:10, 22; 8:35; 9:11; 10:27; 12:28; 13:14; 14:27; 19:23; 21:21; 22:4) and generally speaking, this is true. Obedient believers will care for their bodies and minds and avoid substances and practices that destroy, but some godly saints have died very young while more than one godless rebel has had a long life.... "The righteous man is rescued from trouble, and it comes on the wicked instead" (11:8, NIV) certainly happened to Mordecai (Es. 7) and Daniel (Dan. 6), but...Christian martyrs testify to the fact that the statement isn't an absolute in this life. In fact, in Psalm 73, Asaph concludes that the wicked get the upper hand in this world, but the godly have their reward in eternity. The Book of Proverbs has little to say about the life to come; it focuses on this present life and gives guidelines for making wise decisions that help to produce a satisfying life" (p. 22). Of course, the promises of eternity for the righteous are to be understood in a scriptural context and are to be kept in mind as a given while reading the proverbs.

The NIV Application Commentary cautions: "We may need to unlearn the idea that Proverbs is a book of principles that allow us to predict or even control how life will turn out, a collection of promises that we can cash in like coupons.... Solomon and the sages who followed him never claimed that their observations were promises that God was duty-bound to fulfill. They understood that the wicked sometimes prosper for a time and that the righteous often suffer, but they also knew that God does not stop being God when circumstances seem to point the other way. Instead, these writings show us how life in this God-created universe works so we can work with it and not against it" (p. 43).

On this point, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books* comments: "It is inappropriate to treat the proverbs of this book as promises. They are theological and pragmatic principles.... If, of course, other genres of Holy Scripture set forth that truth [expressed in a particular proverb] as a promise, then it is appropriate to view the proverb in that manner, while acknowledging that the promissory element does not originate with proverbs. That is not their purpose" (Hassel Bullock, 1988, p. 162).

Moreover, we should realize that particular proverbs are sometimes situation-sensitive and not always universally applicable. This explains how we can have proverbs that seem directly contradictory. Perhaps the best illustration of this is Proverbs 26:4-5, where we are told: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes." So do we answer a fool or not? Wisdom is discerning that it depends on the situation. We will see more on these particular verses in a moment. But the same can be said of more modern English proverbs. Consider "Many hands make light work" versus "Too many cooks spoil the broth." Which maxim is true? They both are—but each fits a different situation. Or "Look before you leap" versus "He who hesitates is lost." We find the same principle at work here. Sometimes people need to be more cautious, but in other situations they could be *too* cautious. Wisdom, we should realize, is not only knowing such principles, but knowing when a particular principle is applicable.

Commentator Longman puts it well: "Proverbs are not magical words that if memorized and applied in a mechanical way automatically lead to success and happiness. Consider Proverbs 26:7 and 9: 'A proverb in the mouth of a fool is as useless as a paralyzed leg.... A proverb in the mouth of a fool is like a thornbush brandished by a drunk.' These two proverbs say it takes a wise person to activate the teaching of a proverb correctly. A wise person is one who is sensitive to the right time and place. The fool applies a proverb heedless of its fitness for the situation. The two quoted proverbs are pointed in their imagery. A paralyzed leg does not help the person walk, so a proverb does not help a fool act wisely. According to the second saying, a fool's use of a proverb may be worse than ineffective, it may even be dangerous. Using a thornbush as a weapon would hurt the wielder as well as the one being struck. So a proverb must be applied at the right time and in the right situation. The wise person is one who can do this effectively" (p. 50).

He further adds: "Wisdom, then, is not a matter of memorizing proverbs and applying them mechanically and absolutely. Wisdom is knowing the right time and the right circumstances to apply the right principle to the right person. Returning to the 'contradictory' proverbs about whether or not to answer a fool (Prov 26:4-5), we see now that the wise person must, to put it baldly, know what kind of fool he or she is dealing with. Is this a fool who will not learn and will simply sap time and energy from the wise person? If so, then don't bother answering. However, if this is a fool who can learn, and our not answering will lead to worse problems, then by all means, answer. In a word, proverbs are principles that

are generally true, not immutable laws. Bearing this in mind makes a world of difference when reading the proverbs. Someone reading Proverbs 23:13-14 [about not failing to beat a child with a rod for correction]...and having a mechanical view of the application of the proverbs, may well end up with a dangerous view of parenting.... But this is not a law. It is a general principle that encourages those who are reluctant to use a form of discipline by telling them that it is permissible and even helpful for delivering a child from behavior that may result in premature death” (pp. 56-57). As with the former situation, it is important to discern what action the circumstance calls for.

The book of Proverbs, as with all of Scripture, is vital to living the Christian life. It is quoted nine times in the New Testament: Romans 3:15; 12:16, 20 (Proverbs 1:16; 3:7; 25:21-22); Hebrews 12:5-6 (Proverbs 3:11-12); James 4:6, 13-14 (Proverbs 3:34; 27:1); 1 Peter 2:17; 4:8, 18 (Proverbs 24:21; 10:12; 11:31); 2 Peter 2:22 (Proverbs 26:11). Indeed, the book points to the ultimate wisdom that is found in Christ. Jesus was the preeminent wisdom teacher. He taught with parables—and the Greek word *parabole* was, as noted earlier, used to translate the Hebrew *meshal* (the word translated “proverb” in English). In Luke 11:31 He spoke of the wisdom of Solomon and declared Himself *greater* than Solomon. But more than that, Jesus is the very embodiment of wisdom—“in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). And this was for our benefit: “But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and justification and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30; compare verses 22-24). It is through Christ that we are made truly wise. Of course, that wisdom is reflected in Proverbs, as it is in all Scripture.

Finally, this wonderful trove of wisdom provides God’s people with a crucial guide to navigating the various situations of life. As the *Soncino Commentary*’s introduction to Proverbs notes: “The comprehensiveness of outlook is indeed remarkable. No phase of human relationship seems to be overlooked. The king on his throne, the tradesman in his store and the farmer in the field, husband and wife and child, all receive wholesome instruction and exhortation. Advice is tendered on the treatment of friends, the poor, the rearing of children, the snares which lurk in the path of youth, the perils of overconfidence and self-commitment by standing surety for others. These and other contingencies provide occasion for shrewd counsel, based upon the central doctrine that wisdom is a tree of life *to them that lay hold on her*, and happy is every one *that holdeth her fast* ([3].18).” Let us all strive with Christ’s help to do just that.

Avoid Evil Counsel and Listen to Wisdom (Proverbs 1:8-33)

September 5-6

Instruction begins with the words “My son” (verse 8)—and we see this several other times throughout the opening discourses of the book. Some see this address as formulaic of a wisdom teacher speaking to a disciple. Yet here and in 6:20, the mention of both father and mother make it clear that an actual son is being addressed. Perhaps Solomon wrote this for his own son—though it is later sad to see that his son Rehoboam did not walk in the ways of wisdom, following the foolish advice of his peers rather than the wisdom of elders (a fact made more understandable by the terrible failings of Solomon himself later in life). In any case, every child is to be the student of his parents. This applies to girls as well as to boys.

The book’s first exhortation (1:8-19) is an appeal to reject enticements to run with the wrong crowd—in this case people bent on harming others for gain. Regarding verses 17-19, *The New American Commentary* states: “Verse 17 is confusing as translated in the [NKJV,] NIV and most versions. Even if one is willing to admit that a bird is intelligent enough to recognize the purpose of a trap when it sees it (which is doubtful), the proverb has no point in context. In addition, the Hebrew cannot sustain the translation of ‘spread a net.’ The line is best rendered, ‘In the eyes of a bird, the net is strewn {with grain} for no reason.’ In other words, the bird does not see any connection between the net and what is scattered on it; he just sees food that is free for the taking. In the process he is trapped and killed. In the same way, the gang cannot see the connection between their acts of robbery and the fate that entraps them. In vv. 18-19 the teacher brings his point home: the gang members are really ambushing themselves. The very reverse of their proposal in v. 11 has come about. Also, v. 19 concludes, it will ever be that way” (note on verses 8-19).

We then have, in verses 20-33, the first appeal of wisdom in the book, a discourse with a symmetrical or chiasmic structure (*NAC*, note on verses 20-33):

- A Introduction: an appeal for listeners (vv. 20-21)
 - B Address to the untutored, scoffers and fools (v. 22)
 - C Declaration of disclosure (v. 23)
 - D Reason for the announcement (vv. 24-25)
 - E Announcement of derisive judgment (vv. 26-28)
 - D' Reason for the announcement (vv. 29-30)
 - C' Declaration of retribution (v. 31)
 - B' Fate of the untutored and fools (v. 32)
 - A' Conclusion: an appeal for a hearer (v. 33)

Wisdom is personified as a woman crying out for others to hear and heed her instruction. Further chance to reform is given to those who have thus far failed to heed. For those who do accept correction, Wisdom says, “Surely I will pour out my spirit on you” (verse 23). In its immediate context, this simply means wisdom will be given to those who are willing to learn. Yet since the fullness of wisdom is to be found in God, this could ultimately represent God saying that He will give His Spirit, which brings ultimate understanding and wisdom, to those who accept Him. Again, however, this is not what is directly stated here.

“Wisdom is a personification and not a person or a goddess. The statement that fools call on her when they get into trouble is not a reference to literal prayer but a dramatic picture of fools trying to find a way out of the trouble they are in. They ‘call on’ her in the sense that they are at last ready to listen to advice, but it is too late. Their indifference to Wisdom has already destroyed them (v. 32)” (same note). Of course, their rejection of wisdom is a rejection of choosing to fear God (verse 29), which is the *beginning* of wisdom (see 1:7; 9:10).

This sad warning ends in 1:33 with an assurance of security for those who will heed. As noted in the introduction, we must understand this as a general truth over the course of life. It is not a promise that bad things will never happen to righteous and wise people. Ultimately, of course, absolute and eternal security will be granted to the righteous in the future Kingdom of God.

A Choice Between Two Paths (Proverbs 2)

September 7-8

Whereas the wicked sought through evil means to be enriched by the precious possessions of others in the previous chapter (Proverbs 1:13), it is here in the second exhortation (2:1-22) stated that God’s commands, wisdom and proper understanding constitute the treasures the son should be seeking (verses 1-7; compare 3:13-15; 8:10-11). As one would mine for silver, so the son—so we—must dig, in a sense, exerting effort to uncover the wonderful hidden treasures that God has laid in store (2:4-7). The focus here is on coming to properly fear God and choosing to follow his ways. The choice before the son, the choice before all of us, is presented as two paths of life. The “paths of justice,” by which God’s saints are preserved through wisdom (verses 8-11), stand in stark contrast to the crooked and devious “ways of darkness” (verses 12-15).

The need for deliverance from the way of evil is illustrated by the immoral woman (verses 16-22). “As the father instructs his son in the first nine chapters, there is really one teaching that prevails: avoid immoral women. Proverbs 2:16-22; 3:13-18; 4:4-9; 6:20-35, and the entirety of chapters 5 and 7 are occupied with this theme. The father pulls out all of his stops to bombard his son with this warning. After all, as he points out to his son, the consequences of this foolish act are dire. After this major emphasis, it is a bit surprising, perhaps, to see how little attention is given to the subject in the second part of the book (only Prov 22:14; 23:26-28; 31:2). Indeed, the relevant proverbs simply reinforce the teaching of the discourses in the first part of the book. Who are these women that young men are told to avoid? There are two types: the prostitute and the promiscuous wife. These women, in Hebrew, are referred to as “strange” (*zara*, translated [in 2:16 as] ‘immoral woman’ in [the NKJV and] NLT [New Living Translation, 2002]) and ‘foreign’ (*nokriyya*; translated [in the same verse as ‘seductress’ in the NKJV and] ‘promiscuous woman’ in NLT). They are strange and foreign because they act outside the bounds of law and social convention, seeking sexual liaisons outside of marriage” (Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Proverbs*, p. 133). Indeed, this should have been more characteristic of women of foreign nations—not God’s people.

While we are to understand the immoral woman literally on one level, we should also realize a figurative representation here. We have already seen wisdom portrayed as a woman—and folly is later represented as a woman too. The immoral woman can be seen to represent the faithless way of foolishness and evil generally. Again, there is a choice to be made between two paths—between two ways of life—the right one leading to life and ultimately an eternal inheritance in God’s Kingdom and the wrong one leading to suffering and death.

Seek God’s Guidance (Proverbs 3)

September 9-10

The third exhortation of the book’s prologue (3:1-35) begins with strong encouragement to obey God’s commandments (verse 1) and adopt his character of “mercy and truth” (verse 3; compare Psalm 100:5)—the “grace and truth” that was also the character of Jesus Christ (John 1:14). “The command to ‘bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart’ [Proverbs 3:3; compare 6:20-21] further indicates that the character of the student is in view rather than just his behavior. Some have suggested that the binding of love to the neck means that it is here a kind of necklace that beautifies the individual. But the parallel between ‘neck’ and ‘heart’ here implies that fidelity is more than an ornament to the neck [as in 1:9]. The neck houses the throat which, in Hebrew anthropology, is the very life of the person. Love and faithfulness are to become part of the student’s heart and life” (*New American Commentary*, note on verses 1-4).

Verses 5-8 then give us crucial aspects of true wisdom. A person could know a lot on a human level and yet not truly “get it” in the whole scheme of things. Indeed, this characterizes the wisdom and understanding of the world in general. It is critical to not ultimately trust in oneself. Rather, we must look first and foremost to God for proper guidance in life. We must overcome the tendency to see ourselves as the final arbiter of what is right and instead develop a proper fear of God, which is the beginning of true knowledge and wisdom. This will be to our ultimate good. While verse 8 can be understood to include mental and spiritual health, it is interesting that it speaks specifically of physical health benefits, as does 4:22.

Verses 9-10 tell us to put our money where our mouth is, so to speak. This is a real test of how much we are willing to put God first in our lives and look to Him to take care of us. How we choose to spend our money and our time tells a great deal about our character. If we do our part, God will richly bless us. This is not a promise of immediate material riches but of God providing us with all our needs. Of course, in His Kingdom we will inherit all things.

We are then told to accept correction or discipline from God in verses 11-12, a passage cited in Hebrews 12:5-6. “While the idea of punishment is certainly present (cf. Job 5:17-18 and 2 Sam 7:14), ‘discipline’ primarily involves teaching or training rather than punishment for wrongdoing. It is analogous to military training, in which, although the threat of punishment is present, even stern discipline is not necessarily retribution for offenses. Hardship and correction are involved, however, which are always hard to accept” (*NAC*, note on Proverbs 3:5-12).

Of course, God is not an uncaring drill sergeant. As these verses emphasize, discipline is “exercised in a family setting. The emotion conveyed is not anger or disgust, but love and active concern. A father disciplines his child to help her grow into a praiseworthy adult. Just so God disciplines those who trust Him to help us grow toward moral and spiritual maturity. Bible history and proverbs both demonstrate that at times punishment, a ‘rod of correction’ (Prov. 29:15) is the best way to show love when people will not respond to verbal guidance. The important thing to remember, as these verses emphasize, is that when God disciplines it is because of, and with a continuing attitude of, love” (Lawrence Richards, *The Bible Reader’s Companion*, 1991, note on 3:11-12). Discipline here, it should be further noted, also has the sense of instruction—training, as mentioned above.

In a hymn to wisdom in verses 13-18 it is stressed that wisdom is the true wealth to be sought after (compare 2:4; 8:10-11). Through taking hold of it and holding on to it, we experience “a tree of life” (3:18)—which some see as merely denoting enjoyment and sustenance but which probably harkens back to the original tree of life in the sense of a way to return to paradise and escape the curse of death on mankind. True wisdom from God will indeed lead to eternal life and bliss.

Verses 19-20, appended to the hymn to wisdom, present wisdom’s role in creation, anticipating a fuller exposition in 8:22-31. “The main point there and here is that whoever abandons wisdom runs against the very structure by which the world was made” (*NAC*, note on verses 19-20)—and by which it is

ruled on a cosmic level, the breaking up of the depths referring to the great Flood. “The world is both nurturing and dangerous. Yet creation itself is under the hand of God, and he governs according to wisdom. Wisdom is therefore essential for survival” (same note).

Through God we can and should avoid living in fear (verses 23-26). We are to help others when we can and not seek to harm (verses 27-30). And we are to reject the ways of oppression and foolish scorn, being instead just and humble (verses 31-35). Verse 34 is quoted in James 4:6.

The latter half of this chapter has parallels with the first half of the next chapter, as we will see.

Passing Instruction to the Next Generation (Proverbs 4)

September 11-12

The fourth exhortation (4:1-27) is initially addressed to “my children” or “my sons” (NIV), but later returns to the singular address. This plurality may denote Solomon addressing multiple children. Yet it also may be a nod to the fact that the words here are intended as a collective address for a broader audience and are to be part of the instruction of all homes.

We earlier read verses 4-9 in conjunction with the life of David, as these words—if this chapter was written by Solomon, as it appears to be—constitute David’s instructions to him. Wisdom is exalted here as the principal thing to pursue, keep faith with, love, exalt and embrace. “The metaphor of 4:1-9 is that of obtaining a wife, and verse 9 is a reference to the wedding when the bride placed a garland on the head of the bridegroom” (Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, 1988, p. 169, note on 4:1–5:6). That is, David seemed to be telling Solomon to, in a figurative sense, marry wisdom. And David’s instruction was heeded initially. When presented with a choice of blessings from God, Solomon asked for wisdom and God was extremely pleased. Sadly, Solomon’s later marriages to foreign women, who led him away from God, was a betrayal of his figurative marriage to wisdom.

We may notice that there is no mention of God here, but He is of course integral to the true wisdom that sons are exhorted to seek. *The NIV Application Commentary* has this to say: “It is noteworthy that in contrast with chapter 3, there are no references to the presence or teaching of Yahweh, but this does not indicate that an earlier, nonreligious form of wisdom instruction has been preserved here. If anything, the verbal link between the father’s ‘instruction’ (4:1, *musar*) and Yahweh’s ‘discipline’ (3:11, also *musar*) indicates a tradition of teaching that begins with God and is passed from generation to generation. A series of additional verbal links suggests that the first half of this chapter is to be read in relation to the last half of the preceding chapter. Here is a chart that compares the discipline of Yahweh (3:12) with the instruction of the two fathers (4:1, 4, 10):

Proverbs 3

12: Yahweh’s *musar* like a father’s
 13: Wisdom and understanding
 22: Life and grace
 23: Safe way, not stumble
 24: Sweet sleep
 25: Ruin of wicked
 26: Yahweh your confidence
 31: Do not envy violent man
 31: Do not choose his ways

Proverbs 4

1-3: The father’s *musar*
 5-7: Wisdom and understanding
 9-10: Grace and life
 11-12: Straight way, not stumble
 16: No sleep for the wicked
 19: Paths of wicked darkness
 18: Path of righteous bright
 17: They drink wine of violence
 14-15: Do not walk in the way of evil men

“The significance of the comparison becomes clear when we observe that there is no mention of Yahweh in chapter 4 whereas he takes center stage in chapter 3. In chapter 3 we have the view from above; Yahweh is the one who teaches and disciplines, looks out and protects, and blesses the righteous. Chapter 4 gives us the view from below, in which fathers teach sons to observe the ways of both the righteous and wicked. It is a signal that this teaching comes from God. By placing chapters 3 and 4 next to one another, the sages who gave us these instructions [most likely Solomon here] meant to show that it would be a mistake to separate the wisdom instruction of the home from the wisdom teaching of the Lord. The picture of Yahweh teaching and correcting as a loving father (3:12) makes a theological statement that is key to all of the instructions in Proverbs 1–9, revealing the larger picture of what the parents are doing as they teach their son(s). They pass on what they have received from Yahweh, the source, the

beginning of wisdom teaching. Therefore, the stress in this chapter is on the transmission of wisdom” (note on 4:1-27).

Note also the emphasis on the “path” or “way” one chooses to go. To get to the right destination, one must stay exactly on the only path that leads there. Verse 18 is especially significant and inspiring.

The end of the chapter (verses 20-27) tells us to keep all these principles firmly in mind and to watch where we’re going so as to stay on the right path.

“Drink Water From Your Own Cistern” (Proverbs 5)

September 13-14

This fifth exhortation (5:1-23) instructs the son (verse 1) or sons (verse 7, NIV) to avoid the seductress and enjoy sexual affection only in the marriage relationship with a loving wife—wherein is safety and much greater joy.

“The Hebrew of v. 6 is difficult.... The verse can be translated without changing the Hebrew as, ‘In order that you not pay attention to the path of life; her ways wander (from it), but you will not know it.’ Taken in this way, the point of v. 6 is not that the [promiscuous] woman is a lost and wayward soul [as in the NIV] (however true that might be). In other words, she is not made an object of pity. To the contrary, she is an agent of temptation who deliberately contrives to draw her prey off the path of life (cf. 2:19) and down to destruction. The whole point of 5:1-6 is that the young man should heed wisdom and be preserved; one would therefore expect the text to warn of how the prostitute [or immoral woman] draws him away from the path of life. This is the perspective Proverbs always takes with regard to the adulteress (cf. 6:26; 7:6-26; 9:17-18). She is the hunter, not the victim” (*New American Commentary*, note on 5:1-6).

A wife’s sexual charms are portrayed as a cistern or well of drinking water (verse 15; compare Song of Solomon 4:15). There is some disagreement as to the meaning in Proverbs 5:16 of the dispersed fountains and streams of water in the streets. Some take these to be the wicked, polluted women the man might figuratively drink from. Others see these as the man’s own sexual affections wrongly spread abroad. Likewise verse 17 is seen as referring either to a man not sharing his own sexual affections with other women besides his wife or to a man not sharing his wife’s sexual charms with other men. The former seems more likely given the conclusion in verse 20. In any case, it is clear that the only proper sexual relationship—and the only one that will yield lasting happiness—is that between a man and a woman in the sacred bond of marriage.

Verse 19 clearly expresses God’s approval of intimate love play and physical affection between a husband and wife. For thorough commentary on this subject, see the Bible Reading Program commentary on the Song of Solomon.

As we read through these instructions, besides the direct counsel they give we should also keep in mind the background through all these chapters of wisdom portrayed as a woman we should figuratively marry (intimately bond with) and folly portrayed as a harlot we should avoid.

The chapter ends with sin portrayed as entrapment (verses 21-23). The temporary pleasure of sin will lead to misery and death in the end.

Foolish Ways to Avoid (Proverbs 6)

September 15-16

The first part of this chapter (6:1-19) presents us with four teachings—to seek freedom from unwise pledges (verses 1-5), to learn industriousness and avoid laziness by following the example of the ant (verses 6-11), to not be as the scoundrel (verses 12-15) and to hate the things God hates (verses 16-19).

“The four warnings of 6:1-19 are separate from the instructions on adultery; without this section, that theme would continue uninterrupted in chapters 5-7. Remembering that evil deeds ensnare the wicked (5:22), we might read 6:1-19 as an [inserted] exposition of that theme. The excursus also reminds the reader that not all enticements to folly come from women” (*NIV Application Commentary*, note on 6:1-19).

Regarding pledges, verses 1-5 “warn against putting up surety (see 11:15), or cosigning a loan. This does not mean we should never be generous or helpful if we have the means, only that we should not promise what we cannot deliver. In Solomon’s day, a cosigner who could not pay could lose all he had and be reduced to slavery besides. Even though laws differ today, inability to pay a debt is still a form of bondage and can be a serious problem. Modern conditions are different than in Old Testament times, but the warning still applies” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 1-5).

Another serious entrapment is laziness. Thus we are directed to the example of ants. They have work to do and get it done (verses 6-8). Verses 9-11 are not telling us to avoid needed sleep. Rather, unless health prevents us we must not “sleep the day away.” We all have much to do—and only so much time to do it in. Laziness and lack of industry can ultimately leave us materially impoverished—but even worse, it can keep us from spiritual responsibilities such as prayer and Bible study, leaving us spiritually impoverished and in danger of drifting from God.

In verses 12-15, the “scoundrel and villain” (NIV) is “a troublemaker. Unlike the sluggard, whose only desire is another place to nap, the troublemaker cannot wait to cause more problems or to get into more mischief. Unlike the sluggard (see v. 6), he is too busy, though he is doing the wrong things. He delights in bringing dissensions. But like the sluggard, he does not realize that calamity awaits him” (note on verses 12-15).

Verses 16-19 then present wickedness more generally. “This passage is a numerical proverb (see 30:15-31) that describes seven things that the Lord hates. The use of numerical progression—six, even seven—in these proverbs is a rhetorical device that embellishes the poetry, provides a memory aid, and builds to a climax. It gives the impression that there is more to be said about the topic” (note on verses 16-19). Commentator Tremper Longman says, “Such a device is a way of saying that there are a number of different examples of the phenomenon, only a few of which are given” (*How to Read Proverbs*, p. 45). He also points out that such language was used in surrounding ancient cultures: “Compare Proverbs 6:16-19 with a passage from a Ugaritic myth and from the *Ahiqar* text [mentioned in our introduction].... ‘Truly (there are) two sacrifices Baal hates, three the rider on the clouds [rejects]—a sacrifice of shame and a sacrifice of meanness and a sacrifice where handmaids debauch.’ (KTU 1.4. III. 17-21). [And] ‘There are two things which are good, and a third which is pleasing to Shamash: one who drinks and shares it, one who masters wisdom {and observes it}; and one who hears a word but tells it not.’ (lines 92-93a)” (p. 76).

“In a list of this type, the last item is the most prominent” (*Nelson*, note on verses 16-19). In both the characteristics of the scoundrel (verses 12-14) and the seven things God hates (verses 16-19), the last item listed is sowing discord—causing trouble between other people, especially between brothers, those who would otherwise be close. God views this as utterly despicable. How much worse it is today when people cause divisions between His spiritual children in His Church. God desires the unity of His people (see Psalm 133:1).

The latter part of chapter 6 constitutes the sixth exhortation of the prologue (verses 20-35), a further warning against the danger of adultery. Verses 27-29 emphasize cause and effect and the absolute inevitability of bad consequences of any immoral actions. Verse 32 deserves reflection. It seems to say that immorality is the most self-destructive of all sins—destructive of one’s “soul”—his life and being—even when there are no apparent physical penalties. The apostle Paul may have been referring to this verse when he said in 1 Corinthians 6:18: “Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body.”

The statement in verse 30 about a hungry person stealing to satisfy himself not being despised is not meant to condone theft. Indeed, it is immediately followed by the fact that if he is caught he will be forced to make restitution. The point of this statement here is that theft in such instances is at least understandable as a means to survival and because it is possible to rectify. Sleeping with another man’s wife, on the other hand, never makes sense as it is just the opposite of a means to survival—it is the pathway to death, especially from a jealous husband who cannot be appeased.

“Do Not Stray Into Her Paths” (Proverbs 7)

September 17-18

The seventh exhortation (7:1-27) gives yet another warning against succumbing to the temptations of adultery.

The chapter begins with instruction to prize and be attentive to the father’s commands—which are, in fact, God’s commands. The son is to take wisdom as “sister” and understanding as nearest kin. “Sister” here may be used in the sense of a bride (see Song of Solomon 4:9-10, 12; 5:1-2). In any case, a deep, close relationship is to be forged with all that constitutes wisdom. The young man must be prepared to escape the clutches of that ubiquitous adulteress.

An example is given of a gullible young man who did not escape. The woman perversely speaks of having offered peace offerings, which meant she could bring part of them home for a feast before God—yet her banquet, while her husband is away, is for the purpose of luring the young man into her home.

And in he went to his own destruction. “Her house is a highway to the grave, leading down to the chambers of death” (verse 27, NIV).

When two people engage in premarital or extra-marital sex, the actual circumstances, motives and attitudes vary a great deal. They may both plan on having sex, or one may intentionally seduce the other, or they may be increasingly intimate in their affection and get carried away. Regardless, every couple that engages in immoral sex lacks or ignores the precious wisdom of God that He spells out in His Word for our protection, health and happiness. Wisdom includes making firm godly plans to remain pure. Any decisions made while emotional or sexually aroused will likely be foolish decisions. He who fails to plan plans to fail.

We should remember to see figurative parallels here between the way of wisdom and the way of folly and wickedness. Woman Folly later issues similar invitations with the same horrible result (9:13-18). And we will read of Woman Wisdom throwing a feast in her home and inviting the simple in (9:1-6)—in that case a banquet we should be delighted to attend.

Preparation for and Observance of the Feast of Trumpets (No assigned verses)

September 19-23

The Feast of Trumpets this year falls on the weekly Sabbath, from sunset Friday, September 22, through sunset Saturday, September 23. As usual, we pause to prepare for and observe the Holy Day. To learn more about God’s festivals, send for or download our free booklet *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind* at www.ucg.org/booklets.

The Personification of Wisdom (Proverbs 8)

September 24-25

Chapter 8 is the second appeal of wisdom in the prologue, following 1:20-33, in the form of a hymn extolling its value and importance. Recall that the adulteress was “loud” and “outside, at times in the open square, lurking in every corner” (7:12) to waylay the simple. Wisdom is also to be found crying out all over town and wherever people might be found. But what she speaks is right (verses 8-9). And what she offers is priceless blessings far greater than any physical possessions or pleasures (verses 10-11, 18-21; compare 3:14-15). She may seem undignified in hawking her wares everywhere, so to speak, but the point is that wisdom is not restricted to the higher echelons of society. She is available for everyone who will love her and seek her. Of course, wisdom is also vital for rulers. It is wisdom, skill in how to live and behave, that enables proper governance (8:15-16). Solomon understood this when He asked God for wisdom to rightly govern the nation of Israel.

We must not only love what God loves but also hate what He hates (verse 13).

God Himself made use of His own wisdom in creation (8:22-31; compare 3:19-20). The personification of wisdom here has led some to believe that the preincarnate Jesus Christ is the One speaking as Wisdom in these verses. However, we must consider that Wisdom here speaks of having been “brought forth” before anything else (verses 24-25)—and this is not true of God the Word who always existed. Again, we must understand in this passage a personification of a quality that is not in actuality a person. While there are some parallels here with Jesus Christ, who served as the agent of God in creation and was the embodiment of divine wisdom, we should not make the mistake of equating Him with Woman Wisdom.

Still others see a parallel between the personification of wisdom and the Egyptian concept of Maat, though this is unlikely. The *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* explains: “In ancient Egypt Maat was the abstract principle of truth, order, justice and harmony—as well as the name of a goddess who personified those virtues. Kings were enjoined to practice Maat in order to ensure a long reign.... Scholars naturally wonder to what degree the Egyptian concept of Maat influenced Israelite thinking on justice and order in society. Specifically, the feminine personification of Wisdom in Proverbs 8 has been suggested to have been derived from the Egyptian goddess Maat.... It is difficult to posit a direct line of influence from Egypt to Israel on the subjects of order, justice or Maat. Both Israel and Egypt understood that justice and harmony are necessary for life to function smoothly. But Wisdom, in Proverbs 8, is a personification—not a goddess. She exemplifies the order and justice God has built into creation. Lady Wisdom appears elsewhere in Proverbs; for example in 1:20-33 she calls upon people to heed her teachings and so to find life. The embodiment of wisdom as a lady who invites people to follow her is a distinctively Israelite idea, with no analogy in Egyptian teaching” (“Maat and Lady Wisdom,” sidebar on Proverbs 8, p. 971).

Wisdom’s direct appeal here ends with the assurance of life and blessings to those who find and heed her—and death to those who reject her (verses 32-36).

A Choice of Invitations (Proverbs 9)

September 26-27

The prologue of the book of Proverbs closes in chapter 9 with the choice of two paths represented by the two figurative women, Wisdom and Folly—each here described as making an appeal.

The NIV Application Commentary notes on this chapter: “These descriptions and quotations of Wisdom and Folly are a study in similarities and contrasts. Both Wisdom and Folly call out from a house situated in the highest place. Both begin with the same invitation: ‘Let all who are simple come in here,’ adding an invitation to a meal. Both Wisdom and Folly use proverbs; Wisdom’s speech concludes with a series of proverbs, ending with, ‘If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you; if you are a mocker, you alone will suffer’ (9:12). Folly has only one proverb, but it is revealing: ‘Stolen water is sweet; food {bread} eaten in secret is delicious’ (9:17). However, the teacher shows these similarities only to point out the glaring differences. Wisdom works at building and preparing in order to have a sumptuous banquet to offer her guests while Folly sits at her door, loud [as was the adulteress in 7:11], undisciplined, and without knowledge. The meals are different, Wisdom offering wine and meat [along with bread], Folly offering only bread and water. There are the differences in outcome. Wisdom offers a future, a call to maturity, and in a word, life. Folly only offers the immediate pleasure of good things enjoyed outside their intended boundaries, hiding the fact that such pleasure brings death.”

Wisdom’s house is supported by seven pillars (9:1)—perhaps merely signifying complete stability, as seven is the number of perfection and completion. Some, however, see a parallel with the creation of the previous chapter standing through the seven creation days of Genesis. Some, on the other hand, take the book of Proverbs as a whole to be the house of wisdom, especially given its seven attributed sections (see 1:1; 10:1; 22:17; 24:23; 25:1; 30:1; 31:1).

Wisdom’s banquet, with slaughtered meat, is sumptuous. Mixed wine here may refer to wine mixed with spices, as in Song of Solomon 8:2, or to wine mixed with water, as was common for wine drunk at meals. Joining Wisdom in her house could, as in former parallels, signify marrying her in a sense—dwelling with her in perpetuity.

“The section that follows Wisdom’s invitation [i.e., verses 7-12] appears to intrude, interrupting the contrast with the invitation of Folly. While most interpreters conclude that the section is secondary and therefore unrelated, it is possible to observe an intention behind the inclusion of this discourse. This section not only repeats significant terms from the prologue, it also summarizes the theme of receiving or rejecting instruction that carries throughout the rest of the book (13:1; 15:5, 12; 16:20; 17:16; 18:15; 19:8, 25; 23:9; 27:22). The structure of the section begins with the responses of the mocker and the wise person (9:7-9) and ends with their rewards (9:11-12). In the central position of this frame, ‘the fear of the LORD’ links response and outcome” (note on verses 7-12). This being defined as the beginning of wisdom shows chapter 9 as closing the frame opened in the book’s initial instruction in 1:7, which said that the fear of God is the beginning of knowledge.

Verse 12 lays out the choice between two ways one last time. Then the final section, the appeal of Folly, shows the worthlessness of her offer and where the wrong choice will lead—to the “depths of the grave” (verse 18, NIV). Whose invitation will you accept? If you desire wisdom and the abundant life that results, then you are ready to enter the main part of the book.

Preparation for and Observance of the Day of

Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles (No assigned verses)

September 28–October 21

The Day of Atonement this year occurs from sunset Sunday, October 1, through sunset Monday, October 2. The seven-day Feast of Tabernacles occurs from sunset Friday, October 6, through sunset Friday, October 13. This is immediately followed by a festival on the Eighth Day known as the Last Great Day, from sunset Friday, October 13, to sunset Saturday, October 14. As usual, we pause to prepare for and observe these festivals, allowing for travel time and settling back into routines after the festival period. To learn more about God’s festivals, send for or download our free booklet *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind* at www.ucg.org/booklets.

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