

What is Wisdom?

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[0 : 00] So we have a new series that we start tonight on the book of Proverbs and we are going through it topically because that's really the only way you can go through the book of Proverbs.

The first section of Proverbs chapter 1-9 is attributed to Solomon. And the very first command in the book of Proverbs is, listen my son to your father and mother's instruction. And because of that, most Old Testament scholars think that the book of Proverbs was written originally as basically a textbook for boys.

Proverbs was probably a book for boys and particularly royal boys in the courtroom that were being prepared to rule in Israel.

So that's why if you read through the book of Proverbs during this series you'll see that almost every address is to a son. Here, oh son, listen my son, it's a book for boys that are growing up.

And it participates in a wider genre in the ancient Near East which is the time of the Old Testament called wisdom, the genre of wisdom. Every single culture had wisdom and has produced wisdom literature.

[1 : 17] And that's because when you sent your kids to school in the ancient Near East, it wasn't so much a focus of learning the facts, of studying natural science and learning about gravity or memorizing like the US presidents or something. Not that you would probably do that here, but it was more about formation, about being shaped to become someone, a type of person.

And so this book was adopted into the Old Testament canon and it's for everybody, but it was originally written for the formation of young boys to become wise and just men that were especially going to be leaders.

And just to give you a layout of kind of the other parts of the wisdom literature in the Old Testament, they also think a lot of times that the Song of Songs was written more towards girls. It's a book that's addressed to young girls. And then you have illustrations in wisdom literature of what it looks like to be a wise man or a wise woman.

So the book of Daniel, the book of Job, what it looks like to be a wise man in the midst of suffering, the book of Esther and Ruth, these are illustrations of what it looks like to be a wise woman.

So you can see kind of the layout of the whole of wisdom literature. But at the center of all the wisdom literature is this question. What does it mean to do life well across all circumstances?

[2 : 45] What does it mean to live life well across all circumstances? And the answer in the book of Proverbs is to live life well in any circumstance is called wisdom. Wisdom is central to the book of Proverbs.

And so the question is, what's wisdom? That's the question we have to answer. And so tonight's introductory for the whole series, we're trying to basically define wisdom so we can have a good fundamental definition that we can work with through our whole series in the book of Proverbs.

So we're going to look at three things tonight. First, the weightiness of wisdom, and then we'll look at the definition of wisdom, and then the first and last wisdom.

Okay, so first, the weightiness of wisdom will be very brief in the first point. Chapter 8 is the climax of the part of the book that's attributed to Solomon, chapters 1-9.

And the basic idea in chapter 8 is very simple. Get wisdom. You see it from the very outset of the passage, you need wisdom. That's basically what the passage is saying.

[3 : 50] If you look at the very beginning, does not wisdom call out to you? Does not wisdom beckon you? And then there's a number of metaphors that the author uses here to show you how much, how important wisdom is, how much you need wisdom.

Verse 2, on the heights beside the way at the crossroads, and then verse 3, besides the gate in front of the town, and at the entrance of the portal or city, she cries aloud.

Now these metaphors are progressive, and they're a picture of life. And it says that it starts at the high places, which is basically just a mountain top. So it's saying, first you're standing on the mountain top, and then you're going down and you're approaching crossroads, and making decisions about which way to go, and then you're coming to the front of a city, and then you're entering through its portal.

So you see the picture that's being presented in poetry here. It's of a journey from a mountain top through a valley down into a city, right? And at every point along the way, the picture is that you're supposed to see how much you need wisdom.

When you're standing on the mountain top, you look out at the whole of your journey, the whole of your life, and you see that the only way you're going to get to the city is if you can map out the navigational route to get there. When you come to the crossroads, the point is that it's saying, you've got to make a decision, which way are you going to go?

[5 : 08] And then when you come to the gate, or the portal of a city, the portal, the gate, the entrance of a city in the ancient Near East is not like entering into a city today where you just drive in from the main highway or whatever.

That's not at all. The gate of the city was the courtroom in the ancient Near East. There are guards there. There are judges that stand there every day.

And it's by your words and by your actions that you're determined whether or not you're able to enter the city, or whether you're excluded. At every point in life, in other words, whether you're on top of the mountain at the crossroads or entering the gates, you need wisdom.

Wisdom calls out to you. Wisdom beckons you. It's so important. And the rest of the chapter ups the ante on that. If you look down at verse 10, take my instruction, take the instruction of wisdom, instead of silver and knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is better than jewels.

That word is more precisely rubies. And all that you may desire cannot compare with her. This is another progression, a metaphorical progression. Silver.

[6 : 18] Silver is really valuable. But choice gold, gold that's been purified, right? It's more valuable. It's still today worth much more than silver. And even more than choice gold, the literal word there is rubies.

And I think rubies are still worth more than gold today. But somebody might correct me on that afterwards. I'm not sure, but I think so. In other words, the point is that it's progressive. It's not just silver.

It's not just silver that wisdom is better than it. It's not just gold. It's rubies. No, it's more than rubies. It's anything you desire. Wisdom is better than that. Why? Because the picture that we're being given is this.

The silver, the gold, the rubies, it simply is a metaphor for any of the good circumstances you have in life. Wealth, beauty, cultural pedigree, all of these types of things.

And the reason wisdom is so much better than those things is because they come and go. They are merely circumstantial. Wisdom is something that remains no matter what the circumstance is.

[7 : 20] In other words, what he's saying to us is that wisdom is the ability to flourish in all circumstances, no matter how bad they get. Wisdom is better than gold.

It's better than wealth. It's better than beauty. It's better than intelligence. It's better than cultural pedigree, because it doesn't leave you, in other words. Wisdom remains. Wisdom is there no matter where you are in life.

So that's the first thing. The importance or the weightiness of wisdom. You need it. It's more important than anything else in life. That's what he's saying. Secondly, then, what is it?

The definition of wisdom. So if you take a broad survey of the book of Proverbs, there are a couple things you can figure out, because a lot of the words to describe wisdom are completely based in synonyms.

Words like wisdom is compared to instruction, knowledge, understanding, things like that. These are all synonyms for the word wisdom. So you have to do a little hunting to figure out exactly what the synonyms are trying to tell you what wisdom means.

[8 : 27] But a couple of the things that are definitive across the book of Proverbs. First, wisdom is not knowledge in the sense of knowing facts. So wisdom is not about knowing information.

And what that means also is that wisdom is not about intelligence. Wisdom has nothing to do with your IQ, or how much you know about a particular subject.

For instance, in Proverbs 30, Proverbs 30 attributes wisdom to four animals. This is what it says. There are four things on the earth that are small, but unusually wise.

Ants. They aren't strong, but they store up food all summer long. Rock badgers. Rock badgers. Whatever those are.

They aren't powerful, but they make their homes among the rocks. They have no king... sorry, locusts. They have no king, but they march in formation.

[9 : 29] Lizards. They're easy to catch, but you can find them on all of the king's palaces. Okay? Now, we're not going to break each of those down and figure out what they're trying to say about each one, but the point is that animals are not intelligent.

Right? Animals are much less intelligent than human beings are. Ants are not particularly intelligent creatures. In other words, if you give an ant an IQ test, it will not score well.

The point is that wisdom is not about intelligence. These animals aren't intelligent, but they're wise. They're wise. You know this because, look, everybody knows people that are remarkably intelligent or have immense beauty, the ultimate cultural pedigree from the right families, all the attributes that you could possibly want in life, all the circumstances that you could possibly want, and their lives are crumbling before them.

And we all know people on the reciprocal side that aren't particularly smart people. They don't have cultural pedigree. They aren't the most beautiful in the world, and they're flourishing, and they have peace, and they're joyful, they're happy, and they're doing well in life. Right?

Wisdom. What's the difference? The difference is wisdom. Wisdom is directly attributed in the Book of Proverbs to what it means to flourish, and it's not about intelligence.

[10 : 57] The second thing that wisdom is not about, you can kind of see across the whole scope of the Book of Proverbs, is wisdom is not about merely obeying moral commands.

Wisdom isn't merely, in other words, wisdom isn't merely about rule following. It's, in other words, wise people, of course, obey the moral law.

That's very clear throughout the Book of Proverbs. Wise people are committed to the moral law, to the Ten Commandments, to the law that God gave Israel in the Old Testament, to doing what is righteous and what is good. That's fundamental to what it means to be wise, but wisdom is not merely about obeying the rules, about following the moral commands, like the Ten Commandments.

That in itself is not wisdom. Why not? Because, and here's the definition, wisdom is the ability to do what is good and right when there aren't rules to tell you what to do.

You see, wisdom is the ability to do what is good and what is right when there are no rules telling you what to do, which is almost always in your life.

[12 : 04] For instance, if you find yourself asking, should I murder this guy? Well, there's a simple way to answer that question. You take the moral law, the Ten Commandments, you find out which command says, thou shall not murder, and then you apply it to your situation, and the answer comes out, no.

You shouldn't murder, right? Because you have a clear law that tells you not to. It's very obvious, right, when it comes to something like that. But, ah, wait a minute. Should you marry this guy?

Should you marry this gal? Should you ask this guy out? Should you ask this girl out? Should you buy X or Y mortgage?

Should you buy a car or continue to just walk across the city? Should you join this church or that church? Should you change careers? What is your calling? What's your vocation?

What time should you go to bed at night? What time should you get up in the morning? What kind of education should your kids have? What school should they go to? Should you move your family closer to your relatives?

[13 : 12] Or should you stay farther away from your relatives? Should you buy this dress? Should you buy that shirt? Or not? Should I tell my spouse what my best friend told me to keep an utmost secret and not tell anyone?

Should I visit this person in the hospital? Should I wait? Right, you see? There are rules for this stuff. That's not how ethics works.

That's not how Christian living or living any life works. There aren't moral prescriptions to give you an answer to which mortgage you should choose. There aren't ethical guidelines for that that tell you exactly what to do in every situation.

That's why one of the best books on Proverbs is by a guy named Trimper Longman. And the way he defines wisdom is this. Wisdom is the skill of living life well.

In other words, he says, it's the skill of knowing how and knowing how to do it when. The way I would define it is like this. Wisdom is the skill of doing life well without having rules for every situation.

[14 : 26] You see? One of the examples of this recently, four or five years ago, a book came out. Some of you might have seen it when Helping Hurts. This book had mixed reviews.

I'm not advocating for its message. But the point of the book was basically just a very logical deduction, right? Should Christians help people who are impoverished, who are suffering in bad situations of poverty?

Answer? Yes, right? We have a rule for that. God has told us to do that, right? Now, their point is, ah, but, wait a minute.

And they recount numerous examples in the modern world of how Christians have tried to help poor people, but made the situation worse. Why? Because they didn't know how to help them.

You see? They knew for sure I should help them. That's what's righteous. That's what's good.

That's the moral law. But they didn't know exactly how to do it. And so they weren't aware of the policies in their current government.

[15 : 29] They didn't know how the person had become poor. They didn't know the background of what makes people poor. So they weren't able to pull them out of a situation permanently. And it ended up putting them into worse-off shape, right? What's the difference?

One, the first person knows the moral law. I should help the person who's poor. The second person not only says, yes, I will obey the moral law. The second person thinks carefully about how, you see?

Because there aren't rules for that. The second person thinks wisely. You see the difference. And so Old Testament scholars, they talk about how the idea of wisdom, which is the little Hebrew word, hokema, is all over the Old Testament.

And it applies to all sorts of things, basically just having the meaning of skill. So in the Old Testament, you can find hokema, wise blacksmiths, okay?

You can find wise hunters, wise warriors, wise kings, wise parents, wise moms, wise dads, wise lawyers, wise prophets.

[16 : 33] Wisdom can be the skill, is the skill of doing anything in life. Any profession, any activity, any choice, a conversation, everything can be done wisely or foolishly.

You see? Wisdom, in other words, is more than rule following. And you guys have seen this, you know, when we just simply try to follow the rules or obey the commands without wisdom, that's a person that is very principled, right?

But lacks a particular type of skill or particular wisdom. We think of them as sticklers for morality without actually knowing how to apply the moral order, how to obey.

One of the great illustrations of this in modern literature. And if you haven't read these books or seen these movies, you'll get what I'm saying, regardless, is the most villainous, wicked character of Harry Potter.

It's been three months since I used the Harry Potter illustration, so my time has come again. The most villainous and wicked character in Harry Potter, if you know those stories, is not Voldemort. He's much more interesting than this.

[17 : 44] The most wicked character is Dolores Umbridge, if you've seen the book, or read the books or seen the movies. Dolores Umbridge is a lady that wears all pink, and she has lots of cats, not that those are the bad things about her.

That's totally acceptable. That's not what's bad about her. What's bad about her is that she becomes the headmistress of the school that all the children go to, and she is an absolute stickler for the rules.

She knows the rulebook of the Ministry of Magic inside and out, like no other person ever born, and she applies those rules to the nth degree, seeking the utmost penalty for every single person that falls under her territory.

Any rule you break, she seeks you out, she hunts you down, and she crushes you, because that's justice, right? Well, in the books, Rowling is painting a picture, a difference between her and between Albus Dumbledore, the former headmaster.

Albus, he loves the rules too. He loves righteousness. He loves the moral order. He loves the law. He seeks to obey it.

[18 : 52] He wants his kids to obey it at the school, but what he does when people violate it is he knows that sometimes the best answer is to show mercy, is to enact the rulebook by showing kindness to the perpetrator, because only then could they be restored, you see?

There's a difference. Following the rules and knowing how to apply them, knowing when to apply them, was skill in order to love the person that you're working with best.

And sometimes that means simply showing mercy, like Jesus Christ did. Okay, so we have summary definitions of this idea of wisdom in this passage in verses 12 to 14.

So let's just look at those very briefly, verses 12 to 14. It says, I wisdom dwell with prudence. I find knowledge and discretion. The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil, pride and arrogance in the way of evil, and perverted speech I hate.

I have counsel and sound wisdom. I have insight. I have strength. By me, kings reign. So there are all sorts of synonyms in the Book of Proverbs and three especially important ones in that little section that basically flesh out what we've been saying about the definition of wisdom.

[20 : 08] And let me just give you three of them very briefly. The first is in verse 14, and it's the word insight. That wisdom has insight. And the sense of this word insight, the original word that's behind this English word insight, is that a person with insight or wisdom can see the truth beyond the appearances.

So in other words, a person with insight can enter any situation and uncover what's underneath it, the truth. They can see what's right, what's wrong.

They can think carefully about every situation and discern exactly where their pitfalls or what the good path might be. In other words, it's a person that has particular insight in walking through this world and discerning that every decision they make is a moral decision.

That we live in a moral order, a moral world, and that we have to make moral decisions every day. So that's insight. And then that follows on to the second word, prudence. It's in verse 12, prudence. And the kind of idea behind the word prudence here is that not only can the wise person see the moral order out in front of them, in every situation, they can then carefully weigh all the potential options.

[21 : 23] In other words, a prudent person treats their decisions with a very severe weightiness. That's the idea behind this word prudence. And then the third word is discretion.

Discretion, which is also in verse 12 and 13. That simply means the strict application of decision-making. That they discern the moral, they think about what's best, they weigh up the decisions, and then they act discreetly, or they break it down into parts and make the best decision. They execute. So that's the basic idea of wisdom. It's applying that decision-making process to all of life when there are no rules telling you exactly how to live. Okay?

Now, let me just... I had three examples, but we don't have time for all three. So I'm just going to give one example from the Bible, an instance where you can see this in action.

Maybe two. The first one is Gamiliel. You remember Gamiliel from Acts chapter 5. We talked about him on Sunday morning, not too long ago. In Acts chapter 5, the Pharisees, the Sanhedrin, is meeting together, and they're all basically saying, we've got to kill these Christians.

[22 : 34] We're going to destroy them. And Gamiliel said the one wise Pharisee, and he stands up in their midst, and he says, this is not the right decision.

And they ask him to explain, and he says, look, if this movement, this Christian movement, as it's called, that follows Jesus, is really from God, then it will flourish no matter what you do.

And if you start to persecute it, then what you will find at the end of the day is that you have set yourself against God, if it's for real. On the flip side, he says, if it's not of God, then it will just fade away in time, just like all the other religious movements of the first century did.

So you can see what Gamiliel did there. He weighed the decisions, and he acted wisely. He applied prudence. He applied skill to the situation. And what we find out that we learned this morning from Derek is that by the time Acts chapter 6 rolls around, Gamiliel was exactly right.

The Pharisees determined to persecute, and the persecution spreads the church. It does the absolute opposite of what they wanted to do. You see, this is wisdom being applied by Gamiliel.

[23 : 45] One of the other great instances, of course, is Solomon. Solomon in the Old Testament, in 1 Kings, he has this moment where he's playing the judge, and these two women come to him,

and they both have a claim on a baby, you remember.

And they're both saying, I'm the mother of this baby. And Solomon says, okay, well, cut it in half. Cut the baby in half. And what happens? Immediately, the mother says, no, no, no, don't do it. And Solomon by that knows exactly who the mother is, right? Now, you see what's happening there. When two women come to you and say, this is my baby, claiming the same baby, what do you do? There aren't rules for that, right? Have you ever been in that situation? There aren't rules when two women come to you and say, this is my baby, no, this is my baby. There's no rule. There's no place for that in Leviticus that tells you exactly what to do, right? What's happening there is Solomon is saying, what is the best way for me to out the truth, to find out the truth?

[24 : 51] And he's applying skill in that situation. Cut the baby in half. That was his wisdom, right? Because he knew what it would do. He knew it would uncover the truth. Okay, so wisdom is the application of, sorry, wisdom is decision-making, skillful decision-making, when there aren't any rules to know what to do, which is pretty much the decision-making that you encounter in every aspect of your entire life, almost every aspect, okay?

Now, thirdly and finally, how do we get it? How do we get this skill, this wisdom? All of us here tonight are at various stages of wisdom.

Some people are more wise and some people are less wise in tending toward the opposite spectrum of foolishness, right? But all of us, every single one of us, find ourselves in some situations in life where we don't know what the obvious choice is, what the wise application of some decision might be.

We all find ourselves in these moments. So what do we do? How do we get it? How do we become more wise? How do we get wisdom? And the answer is the first and the last wisdom.

The first and the last wisdom. And it's found right here in the middle of the passage. If you look down at verse 22, wisdom, this is metaphorical, by the way, but wisdom becomes personified.

[26 : 22] It takes on human characteristics. And it says, the Lord possessed me at the beginning of His work. The first of His acts of old. Ages ago, I was set up at the first before the beginning of the earth.

Now, this, in other words, wisdom, lady wisdom here, is taking us back to Genesis 1. And she's taking us back to the very beginning when God created the earth. And even taking us back to the very, very beginning in Genesis 1, verse 1 to 2.

Because if you see in verse 25, before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth, before He had made the earth with its fields. In other words, before God had made anything, there was lady wisdom with God.

And it goes on to say that lady wisdom in verse 30 was like a master workman. The literal word there is architect. That by wisdom, in other words, God made the world like a workman.

It was wisdom was his attribute that he used. In other words, what it's saying is this. Wisdom was the mediator of creation. Wisdom is the agent.

[27 : 29] Wisdom personified is the agent or the mediator. It's the thing through which God created the world with skill, like an artist. Like a brilliant artist fashioning a painting.

That's the way God's creation is being described. And what that means is that God made the world with a particular fabric, a particular pattern.

Reality has a pattern or a fabric. It's wise, which means that at fundamental level, God made this world good with a good order.

You guys know natural laws, right? The laws of gravity, aerodynamics, anything like that. Things that make planes come off the ground. Things that pull you back down to the ground.

What happens if you disrespect the natural laws? The laws of gravity. If you disrespect the law of gravity, it will destroy you. It will crush you.

[28 : 27] You will fall and it will break you, right? And in the same way that God made the world with natural laws, he made the world with relational laws, the moral order. And he said in Genesis chapter one that this world is good.

That's the fabric. That's the wisdom by which he created the world. And when we disrespect that moral order, it crushes us. It breaks down relationships. That's exactly what happened in the Garden of Eden.

And the entire history of humanity is the story of humanity disrespecting the wise moral order of God. The fabric, the pattern of creation, the relationship between human and God, human and human, and human and nature.

That's the story. The wisdom literature, proverbs, all the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East, the wisdom literature that you can find amongst the Greeks and the Romans just after the Old Testament.

Every single ancient culture had wisdom literature. They're all asking the same question. This world is broken. How do we get wisdom? And Proverbs chapter eight gives you the slightest hint about exactly the answer to that.

[29 : 36] Because what it does is it personifies wisdom. It personifies wisdom. It says wisdom was there in the beginning like a person. In John chapter one, the New Testament gives us the answer.

How do you get wisdom? What's the foundation of wisdom? In the beginning, John writes, was the word. And the word for word there is the word, *logos* in Greek.

By the time that the New Testament was written, the word *logos* had become the word for wisdom. You see, Greek philosophy had taken the word *logos* and said, this means wisdom.

And everybody was in search for the *logos*, in search for wisdom, all the different philosophers, all the people, where can we find *logos*? Where can we find wisdom? And John opens his gospel and says, in the beginning was the word, the *logos*, and the word was with God and was God, and he became flesh and dwelt among us.

In other words, wisdom, getting wisdom, is not just about mastering rules. It's not about memorizing proverbs. But more than anything else, it's about falling in love with a person.

[30 : 51] With a person. And coming under the school of that person. You see, that's what John is saying. Jesus Christ is the wisdom of God.

That's John's point. Jesus came to a world that he created wise, but that had become foolish in its rejection of God.

And Jesus Christ went to the most foolish thing in all the world, the cursed tree, in order to give us an ability to become wise again. You see, that's the gospel.

And in Matthew chapter 11, and we'll close with this, Jesus was speaking to his disciples as the ultimate sage, the ultimate wise man, the ultimate master, and this is what he said to them, Come unto me all you who labor and are weary laid, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for my burden is easy and my yoke is light. In other words, what he said was this, if you want wisdom, you first have to come to me in a way that I've become your rescuer, because you've become foolish.

[31 : 58] Sin is foolishness. Foolishness is sin. So the first thing he says, if you want wisdom, you have to come unto me, all of you who are desperately searching for wisdom, for the good, for hope, for mercy, for peace, and I will give you rest.

That's the gospel. That's the gospel. And then he says, Take my yoke upon you. That's the school of Christ. You see, the school of wisdom.

To go back to Proverbs 1, Proverbs was a book of instruction for young people trying to learn what it means to live life well. And in Matthew chapter 11, Jesus is fulfilling the Proverbs.

He's saying, Come to me in the gospel. Christ died for me, and I will give you rest. And then you can take my yoke upon you and learn from me, the school of wisdom, the school of Proverbs.

We're going to be going through, this is the last thing, we're going to be going through all sorts of categories of life in this series, of how to apply wisdom to all aspects of life.

[33 : 05] We're going to be talking about sexuality, words, maleness, femaleness, beauty, what it means to be a sloth, what it means to be bored, knowledge, wealth, poverty, justice, mercy, anger, kindness, and more.

These are the categories we're going to be looking at in this series, and applying wisdom, Proverbs to them. The introduction is this. Jesus Christ is the ground of all wisdom.

He is the revelation of wisdom to us. He is for us the rescuer of the foolish that want to be wise. And he is the ground, the road, the path that we have to walk on for anyone who wants to enter into the school of wisdom.

It's to enter into the school of Christ. He is our savior first, and he must become our example if we want to learn to be wise. So what we're asking then for the rest of the series is, how then should we live?

We'll pick up next week. Let's pray. Father, give us the wisdom we ask that we don't have. James tells us to ask for it. And the first place we need to go is to see Jesus Christ for us.

[34 : 19] So we ask that this gospel ground would be the road we walk on in this summer series, and that we would become wise because of it. And we ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.