

Dr. Fred Putnam, Proverbs, Lecture 1

Hi, I'm Fred Putnam. I have been teaching Old Testament and Biblical Hebrew for over 20 years and this is a series of talks on the book of Proverbs, found in the Bible right after the Psalter and right before Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. We are going to be talking about Proverbs in four different lectures. The first one is an introduction to the book and then a couple of talks on how we read a Proverb, and the fourth lecture will actually be an example of working our way through a couple of individual proverbs.

So let's begin by talking about what is actually in this book and where did it come from? Let's begin by asking where it came from. The first verse says, "Proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel." The way that the Bible works, that actually means that Solomon is the king of Israel and that he is the son of David. Now, probably the stories about Solomon and his great wisdom are very familiar to you. But I'm just going to briefly look at 1 Kings chapter 3 and a couple of other chapters to review this because this sets the stage for the book because one of the reasons for identifying the author of the book is because we have some reason to trust what the book itself says, and since Proverbs, unlike, say, the books of Samuel or Kings or Joshua or Judges or Chronicles or almost every other biblical book Proverbs tells us who wrote it. We have some reason to suspect that we are told that Solomon is the author because we should know something about Solomon.

So, in 1 Kings chapter 3 (I'm not going to read it; I am just going to summarize it) after he became king and his father David had died Solomon went to make some sacrifices at the high place in Gibeon and the Lord appeared to him in a dream and basically promised him anything he wanted. Solomon said you've made your servant king in place of my father David. But then in verse 9 he says, "So give your servant a hearing heart [or a listening heart] to judge your people to

discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great [actually the word is heavy, weighty] people of yours.” The Lord was pleased with Solomon's request and said I will give that to and since you didn't ask for the other things and asked for this really wise thing, I will give you wealth, and a long life and happy reign as well.

Well, what was Solomon's request? His real request was for the ability to act as a judge so that when he heard court cases he would be able to tell who was telling the truth and who was lying. That's why this story about Solomon's receiving this gift of wisdom is immediately followed by the story of the two women, the baby, the king, and the sword. When the two women bring a baby to Solomon, and one says, “This is my baby” and the other says, “No, this is *my* baby.” And one says, “It's my baby. We both had babies; she rolled over and killed her baby in the night. Then she stole mine away from me,” but the other one says, “It's my baby who's alive. You're the one who did it.” And Solomon said, “Bring me a sword we'll cut the baby in half. One woman says “Okay,” and the other one says, “Don't harm the baby give it to her.” And he says, “She's the real mother, give it to her.” Now, the upshot of that: there are really two reasons for that story, which, by the way, whenever we are told a story we always ought to ask ourselves: why has this story been preserved? I mean, sometimes it's just a good story so it's fun to listen to. But at the same time there's a reason that out of all the good stories that are fun to listen to, this story or that story was chosen to be preserved for, now, 3000 years.

Well, the last verse of 1 Kings 3, 1 Kings 3:28, says this, “When all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had handed down, they feared the king for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice.” You see in the ancient near east, the world in which Solomon and Iron Age Israel lived, the responsibility of the king was to ensure the wellbeing of his people by his ability to do justice. That's why when we look at documents from the ancient Near East we find, for

example, that Hammurabi—perhaps a king of whom you have heard—Hammurabi erected a huge, about a 6-foot tall chunk of black stone with laws carved into it that some people think are court decisions that he made and this is a record of all his decisions. Some people think that these are laws that he codified; people disagree about it. But the important thing is that the top of the front of what's called the "stella," or "stele" is about an 18-inch panel that doesn't contain any laws, but it contains a picture. The picture is the God, Marduk, standing in front of Hammurabi and handing the laws to the king or maybe (there's disagreement about exactly what it means) the king is showing the laws to the god for his approval. The point is that the king is authorized to be king by the gods because of his ability to administer justice. Whether the gods give him the laws that he enforces or he is wise enough to act as a good king—that is, as a good judge—is kind of debated and some stories about the king seem to say one thing and some seem to say the other. But we have exactly the same thing said here about Solomon. That he's not just given wisdom the way it's maybe told in Sunday school. He's not just made the wisest person in the world. He was given a particular kind of wisdom: the ability to see the truth of a situation and as a judge to render a judgment according to what is true.

A little later, that is in the end of chapter 4, it says that God gave Solomon wisdom, very great discernment, a breadth of heart, a wide heart, like the sand on the seashore, that's how wide his heart was. It stretched on and on and on. So it was able to comprehend lots of things. Well, this sounds like the Lord just gave Solomon wisdom to understand everything. It does say that his wisdom surpassed all the wisdom of the sons of the east and the wisdom of all Egypt. Well that's a lot of wisdom, as we will see in a few minutes for he was wiser than all men and it goes on and lists all the people he was wiser than. He spoke more than 3,000 proverbs and wrote over a 1,000 songs. He talked about trees and the cedars and the hyssop and animals and birds and creeping things and fish. Well, yes, those are

true things, that's the record that we have about Solomon, but the request that Solomon made, and the special gift that God gave him was insight into the human heart.

So people came from all over the world it says, that is all over the ancient Near East. Do not think that people came from Australia or North America--to hear the wisdom of Solomon. They're not just coming to hear him because as we find out in chapter 10, when the queen of Sheba which is another story that perhaps you know, comes to visit Solomon. She comes and it says that she comes to test him and she asks him questions and talked to him about everything that was in her heart and Solomon answered all her questions. Nothing was hidden from her which she didn't explain to him. That would have been the way that it was if you had a reputation for being wise. Then the wise men from other countries would come to see if you really are as wise as you claim, or as the reports that have been made about you. So that it's entirely possible that people came from Egypt to see—is Solomon's wisdom greater than the wisdom of 2000 years of Egyptian history? Is Solomon's wisdom greater than the wisdom of the Hittites or of the Mesopotamians; that is the Babylonians or Accadians or Syrians—whoever else? They came to test him and to find out if Solomon's reputation really was valid.

So when the author, or the editor probably, of the book of Proverbs says: "The Proverbs of Solomon the king of Israel, the son of David," he wants us to think back on all that history. He even wanted his original readers, several thousand years ago, to think in terms of what they knew about Solomon—understood about him. So, I encourage you, if you haven't read those stories about Solomon recently, to go back and read them; read them in the book of Kings and also in the book of 2 Chronicles, because that provides some pretty important background for understanding what we find in the book of Proverbs—knowing who the author is and knowing what kind of a person he was.

It also helps us understand something else. People read through the book of Proverbs and they get to chapter 30, and they find something quite surprising. In chapter 30, we find, “these are the words of Agur.” I thought, “wait a second, I thought this was the book of Solomon’s proverbs.” No, the words of Agur, son of Jakeh of Messa. Then in chapter 31, it’s not even the words of king Lemuel, it’s the words that king Lemuel’s mother said to him. Then I think, “well, wait a second; is Solomon the source, or are these other people the source?” What does it mean to say that these are the Proverbs of Solomon? Does it mean that Solomon sat around and thought and made up all these proverbs? That’s pretty unlikely.

We do know, it says in Kings, that he spoke over 3,000 proverbs. But if you read about the subjects of those proverbs in Kings, the list that I mentioned a minute ago, it says plants and animals and fish and creeping things. There are not very many verses in the book of Proverbs about those topics. Most of the verses in Proverbs, with really just a few exceptions, are about people, and not about plants or animals or other non-human aspects of creation. Maybe we should think about it this way: here’s Solomon sitting on the throne of Israel. He has a reputation across the ancient Near East as a wise man. So people come to Solomon to test him. How did they test him? Well, we don’t live in a very proverbial culture—that is people who quote proverbs a lot can be thought of as stony and unoriginal thinkers. You know, you don’t have anything original to say, so you repeat what you heard somebody else say.

There are other cultures in the world, however, where the ability to recite proverbs is paramount. In fact, there are some cultures in sub-Saharan Africa, where there really aren’t any lawyers. And if you have a court case against someone else in your village or someone from another village, each of the two parties in the case find someone that they know is very wise—someone that has a reputation for wisdom. And they take them before the king of the tribe or the chief of the village and one of the wise men speaks and gives a couple of proverbs

that apply to the particular case at hand. Then the other wise man replies with a proverb or two. Then the first one replies with a proverb, and they keep doing that, basically they quote proverbs back and forth at each other. The proverbs are the legal argument. That probably sounds a little bizarre to us. But that's how the case is decided. In fact, in some tribes, the case is decided when one of the men runs out of a proverb to respond with; he doesn't have anything else to say. That's how they know who's right—because one lawyer, in our terms, came up with an unanswerable argument.

So, here's Solomon sitting on the throne, people coming all over the ancient-near-east to test his wisdom. How do they test his wisdom? We'll talk about this in a few minutes, but at the beginning of Proverbs it says, "these are riddles." There's another word there that we don't know exactly what it means I like the King James translation that says they're 'dark sayings'—*hidotam* is the word. They're not all meant to be understood the first time we read through them, or maybe it's saying there's a lot more to these verses than they're saying. They really need to be pondered and thought about. So someone comes to Solomon and says, "Have you ever heard this one?" Solomon listens to it and says, "Okay, I can explain that." And he explains it to them.

The point of 1 Kings, especially in the end of chapter 4, and chapter 10—the queen of Sheeba—is not that Solomon is spouting proverbs continually, but that he is able to understand what's said to him. Remember the gift he asked for was the gift of insight and the ability to distinguish good from evil. So when we read that "these are the words of Agur; these are the words of king Lemuel, which is mother taught him," it's entirely possible that both of those chapters--you probably read "the oracle" in chapter 30 verse 1 depending on your translation or "of Massa or the Massasoit" which is a little Arab kingdom (or what today would be an Arab kingdom) in the Northeast region of modern Syria that was bordered on Solomon's territory. It was the territory that Israel controlled. It's possible—I

don't know this, it's just a theory; but it's one that helps me understand what's going on in these two chapters at least—that Agur and Lemuel visited Solomon or sent wise-men to test Solomon. Solomon, hearing these proverbs that we find in chapters 30 and 31, at least the first 9 verses of chapter 31, Solomon hearing those, says, “you know, those are good sayings and so I am going to incorporate them in my collection.”

So what we actually have in the book of Proverbs is not Proverbs authored or dreamed up by Solomon, but proverbs instead, that Solomon has given his seal of approval to—or that he has authorized rather than authoring. In fact we have a statement in chapter 24, verse 23 that says, “these also are words of the wise.” Well, who are the wise? Those apparently are some of the other people that came and tested Solomon's understanding. Solomon said, “Yeah, I like your sayings too, so I'll use them in my collection.” The title then, is not really a statement of authorship so much as it is a statement of authority. Solomon's stamp stands on the whole collection. Somehow, 250 years later, when Hezekiah was king, his men discovered, or someone discovered, another few hundred or about 150 proverbs that were somehow identified as Solomon's—whether they had his signature on the scroll or some other way. So they incorporated those as well—that's what we have in chapters 25 through 29. I'll talk about that in a minute when I look at a brief outline of the book.

When we look at the book of Proverbs, it's very tempting to see it as some sort of “hodge-podge” or just a haphazard collection. But there are a couple of things that show us that the book is very deliberately shaped; not only did Solomon originate it, but he had a plan in mind. Even the parts that were collected later, like chapters 25-29, also show evidence of pretty careful organization. Now I am going to say right off the bat that some of this only shows up in Hebrew, so if you have not studied Hebrew you won't be able to hear the sounds, the words that sound alike, or sometimes words that are closely related but don't come across the

same way in translation. But even without knowing Hebrew, even just reading it in English or whatever language you are reading, we can see that the book has been pretty carefully organized.

It actually looks like a combination of two different kinds of what's called "instruction literature" from the countries around Israel. Found in both Mesopotamia and in Egypt we have instructions written by fathers, usually a king or vizier or somebody pretty high in authority, to a son who is "tapped" for stepping into a position of authority or leadership. There are two types of these; one type has a title, very simple "The Words of Ptahotep" or someone else, "which he spoke to his son concerning..." And then there's a list of sayings; that actually sounds a lot like what we find in chapters 25-29. It's what we see in chapters 30 and 31 as well. But the more complex type has a title and then an introduction, a more poetic introduction, that is longer poems, and then a subtitle, then some proverbs, then maybe some of them even have a second subtitle, and more proverbs, and we find that in chapters 1-24.

So it seems that the book of Proverbs was compiled by Solomon, 10th century B.C. in keeping with the pattern of the world around him. He just took a literary form that everybody in his time would have recognized (everybody who could read, that is) and adapted it for his own purpose, and we'll talk about that purpose in a bit. So when we read through the book we find the title in chapter 1 verse 1: "Proverbs of Solomon, King of Israel, son of David." Then in chapters 1-9 we find these brief poems, most of them are fairly short, that deal with wisdom and really are meant to motivate us to want to read the book and want to understand it. Then we come in chapter 10, in the beginning verse it says, "The Proverbs of Solomon," there's a subtitle, and there's another subtitle in chapter 24. When we come to chapter 24 verse 23 it says "These also are words of the wise" some people think there is a subtitle in 22:17 as well "the words of the wise" and the collection itself then is broken up into a couple of smaller pieces in that first

big collection.

Then we have more Proverbs of Solomon “set in order” or “transcribed” or something like that. The verb only occurs once or twice, so it’s kind of hard to know how to translate it. It seems to be “which they moved,” the men of Hezekiah “moved” 25-29, and then the words of Agur in 30, the words of the mother of Lemuel of Massa in 31. Then at the very end of the book in chapter 31 verses 10-31, we have a poem that's of a type called an acrostic, which means that each verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Verse 10 begins with *‘aleph*, verse 11 with *bet*, etc. through the end of the chapter, 22 letters, 22 verses. Should that be considered part of the words of Lemuel’s mother? The attraction there is that a mother is going to be very interested in the kind of woman that her son marries, and so it seemed like good advice to give to your son. On the other hand, there may be some other purpose to that besides just telling a son, a man, what kind of woman to look for, and it doesn't fit with the style, I guess we could say, of the first nine verses which are quite clearly her words where she is talking and she says, "My son..." and talks to him about how a king should live, reign and make judgments actually. So whether that's a separate section, some people think it's completely separate and it's a poem that's been kind of stuck on the end. Other people think, no, it's part of the words of Lemuel's mother and we could debate and discuss that for a long time, but I'll let you read that yourself.

So the book itself is organized by subtitles, sort of like the book of Ezekiel is organized by dates or Haggai is organized by dates, or the gospel of Matthew is organized by chapters about what Jesus did, and then chapters of what he said, and then a chunk of what he did, and then a chunk of what he said. There's another way to look, at the organization of the book of Proverbs and that is when we look at the material that's contained in the different chapters we find that it actually shifts from one piece to the other. It's not simply that the whole thing is a long list of proverbs like you might find in a collection on the internet, for example, of

American Proverbs and then there are 34 screens with hundreds and hundreds of sayings just jumbled altogether. We find in chapters 1-9 poems, longer or shorter, mostly shorter, which are intended to persuade us, to motivate us, to pursue wisdom. They really do this in two ways; they do this by giving us positive motivations, so they say, for example, in chapter 2 "If you pursue wisdom you will find the wisdom of God" or in chapter 3, "You'll get long life, you'll get honor with God and with other people," "Wisdom says I hold riches in my right hand, I hold power, by me kings reign, by me rulers judge." So there is this promise that if you study this book and become the kind of person that it's enabling you to become then you will be rich. You'll have a long life, a happy life; you'll have power and authority. I mean, that's a pretty strong motivation for most of us or for many of us. But it also has another kind of motivation and that is the negative one, where it describes the fool and says "you know, there's only one end for a fool; all fools end up dead." and it says that over and over again. Whether the folly is sexual folly, whether it's laziness, or whether it's foolishly committing yourself to pay someone else's debt or meet their obligation. He just says that you are not going to escape the consequences of folly. And so the motivation is "Here are the good things that wisdom promises, go after those. Here are the bad things that result from folly, flee from those." And Proverbs says, again and again, you can only go in one of two directions: you are either going toward wisdom or toward folly. There's nothing in between. So if we are pursuing wisdom we're abandoning folly; if we are abandoning folly, we are seeking after wisdom.

So the first nine chapters really are written as a forward, a preface, to the rest of the book and the importance of that is much of the material in those chapters is not proverbial. There are a few small collections of proverbs, like at the end of chapter 4, but most of the material contains these poems, some of which even tell stories. In chapter 7 there's the story about the youth who meets the woman and goes to her house and commits adultery, but they're not what we think

of as Proverbs, so I think a lot of readers tend to skip over chapters 1-9 to get to the real stuff, the real sayings, the stuff that we recognize. Okay, here's a verse on your enemy, here's another verse on the wind, here's a verse on living in a house, here's a verse on and we say okay, those are Proverbs. But, the importance of chapters 1 through 9 is that they provide a theological framework for reading and understanding the rest of the book. If we skip over them, it's a bit like skipping over the first two or three chapters of a book where the author explains why he's writing the book, how he's going about it, and how the book is organized. Then we get to, or we decide we're going to start with chapter four, and we don't understand why he's writing the book, we don't understand how or why it's organized the way it is and we don't understand what he's trying to accomplish, well we shouldn't, because we've ignored what he said. Chapters 1 through 9 are meant to give us a framework, or, to use another metaphor, to give us a foundation—some basis for understanding it. So those chapters are where we read the most about what the Lord does, and what the Lord thinks, how God acts, how God regards different kinds of people because that's meant to give us, to protect us against thinking, that the book of Proverbs is just secular wisdom.

You'll often read that statement, even from good biblical scholars who'll say Proverbs contains secular wisdom that is given kind of a veneer of theological respectability. Maybe we could think of it another way, and when we read chapter 8, and the long poem about the creation of the world and wisdom's role in that, perhaps instead, chapters 1 through 9 are to get us to understand that there is no such thing as secular wisdom. That instead, wisdom is part of Creation, because wisdom is part of God, it is something, it has such a character, it has such a strong characteristic of God, that it itself shaped the nature of the world in which we live as well as our own natures. So that, living a life that's wise (or to use other translations, skilled) living is, to live a life that is in line with the way that God has made the world and if you've ever cut a piece of wood you know that you get a

much smoother cut if you go with the grain than if you go against it. Trying to live according to the way things are meant to function means that we're probably going to function a whole lot better than if we're trying to live against the grain. That's really what chapters 1 through 9 are doing. I mean they're doing many other things as well that I don't have time to go into, but that's what we find in there, these long poems that are intended to motivate us, positively and negatively.

Well, when we come to chapter 10, now we come to what we think of as proverbs, and strikingly, chapters 10 through 15 almost all of these proverbs contrast two things: wisdom and folly, diligence and laziness, righteousness and wickedness, or innocence and guilt, or somebody who speaks abusively and somebody who speaks healingly, or selfishness and generosity, all sorts of topics. But the first, those 6 chapters, most of the verses, not all, but most of the verses, contrast two things. That accomplishes a couple of purposes. One is, it sets up, perhaps, what we might think of as a natural dichotomy between wisdom and folly, and so we say, "Okay, I can see where he's going. He's saying that all of these behaviors eventually fall out in one or the other of those two areas." But another thing that it does, by talking about wisdom and folly in one verse, and then righteousness and wickedness, or innocence and guilt in the next verse, it shows us that wisdom and folly are not merely behavioral categories, but they're actually moral categories. It shows us that the world itself, life itself, is a moral undertaking and sets a tone for our understanding of our lives that we are making decisions in the way we speak, the way we live, the way we act, the way we treat other people, the way we treat ourselves, we're making decisions that are, in fact, moral in tone. And those first 6 chapters of "proverbs proper," as we might call them, chapters 10 through 15, make this point over and over again, again by concatenating things, they're not random, although sometimes is hard to see through why they are set up the way they are. But they are drawing these contrasts that encourage us to see things in terms of contrast. Not a very popular notion

today, we don't want to see things in shades of black and white, we really like the color gray in all its shades. That is not the worldview of Proverbs in many ways. I'll come back to that caveat in a few minutes.

Then in chapter 16:1-22:16, we see a lot of proverbs of all different types, some contrasting, some more the two-line sort that say the same thing, we're going to talk about parallelism in a later lecture. And a number of them where they say one thing is better than another, it's kind of a jumbled mix of different types. Again, when I say jumbled I don't mean it's random, I just mean the order is not readily apparent to us. We might say why not put all the proverbs that are of this type in chapter 16 and all the proverbs of this type in the next chapter? Or why not put all the proverbs that are about money in chapter 16 and all the proverbs that talk about marriage in chapter 17 and so on. I've often wondered if perhaps the reason Solomon didn't do it that way at least partially is to not give us the option of skipping chapter 17 because we don't want to deal with marriage, or fixing up our marriage. We never know when we're going to run across a verse and go "Oh my goodness this applies to me;" he doesn't give us that escape. Like someone I once read about, ripped out a chapter of an epistle in the New Testament because it condemned certain choices they were making about their lives. We're not given that choice in Proverbs.

Then in chapter 22 starting in verse 17 and going to the end of 24, we find a different kind of proverb, that there have been a couple of them in the book up to this point, most specifically in chapter 3:1-12 which is an extended poem, but in chapter 22:17 and following into chapter 24, we find almost every proverb consists of a command plus reasons for why we should obey that command. Again, a different kind of proverb, our proverbs don't usually command people to do things, but sort of give us little bits of advice, perhaps. Or sometime just make observations, as lot of verses in the book of proverbs do, but these are very specific commands about what a person should or should not do and why. The end

of chapter 23, the last 6 or 8 verses, and at the end of chapter 24 we find two short poems. At the end of chapter 23 there is a poem on drunkenness, and the end of chapter 24 a poem on laziness.

Then in chapter 25 where the proverbs that were transcribed, or whatever they did by the men of Hezekiah, we find a new--not a new type of proverb--but one that again has occurred only sporadically in chapters 10 through 24. And that's a proverb that we call "emblematic" or you can think of it almost like a political cartoon in the newspaper where there's a picture and then maybe there's a donkey and an elephant, and if you don't know anything about American politics you don't know that that stands for the Democratic and Republican party respectively. Then there's a caption underneath that says, you know, something about leading donkeys to elephant troughs, or whatever it might say. Well, the caption is to help us understand the point of the picture, and that is exactly what these proverbs do. Not all the proverbs in these chapters are that way, but in chapters 25 and 26 most, or many, of the Proverbs are emblematic, a type again that's hardly appeared earlier in the book and appears only rarely after that. So somebody made a choice that we're going to gather all these proverbs together and we're going to begin this second, this later collection, with this kind of saying.

Now again we have to remember when I say chapters 25 and 26 that chapter divisions aren't original. In fact, not even the verse divisions as far as we know are original to the text. In fact, that's why you get different verse divisions, even in the book of Proverbs you have different divisions and different translations. But the collection that begins in what we have as chapter 25 begins with these emblematic--many, many emblematic proverbs. Then in chapter in 27 up through for most of the chapter we have again a lot like we find in chapters 16 through 22 where there are different types and different topics. But at the end of 27 there's another brief poem. This time it's about herds and flocks and we think why is he talking about sheep herding and being a farmer. Well I think the answer

to that is found in chapters 28 and 29. Many of the proverbs in 28 and 29 address leadership, being a judge, making decisions in court, kingship, having rule or authority. Not all but many do. Many more proportionately than we've seen again earlier in the book. So that that becomes a motif of these chapters, the nature of rulership and kingship. When we read that, then it's possible to read these verses at the end of chapter 27, verses 23-27, "Know well the condition of your flocks, that piece of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds" as again reflecting the world of the ancient Near East (well, all the proverbs reflect that of course because that's their world) but in the ancient Near East the king was talked about as the shepherd of his people. Even, if you know any ancient Middle Eastern history perhaps you've heard about how cruel and wicked and despotic the Assyrian kings were. Even the Assyrian kings claimed that they were shepherds, they called themselves shepherds, appointed by the gods to shepherd the nation of Assyria. If that's true, and that's a valid analogy or explanation, then verses 23-27. This brief poem, basically sets up that, as a king, you need to pay attention to the condition of your country, and then goes on in chapters 28 and 29 to explain what it is that makes a king a good king. What is it that makes for a stable country? So that we read such verses as "a king's throne is established on justice and righteousness" or "by his justice the country stands or falls" [That's a paraphrase]. Then in chapter 30 we come to another kind of proverb, after a couple brief poems of Augur. There is a set of proverbs that say there are three things of which this true, even four. Again, almost a new kind we had something like that back in chapter 6 where there were "6 things that the Lord hates, yes, even 7," but we have another kind of proverb. So somebody made the decision again, we're going to put all these proverbs or most of them at least together in this spot and then as I mentioned earlier we have this acrostic poem that ends the book.

Now you might say what's the point of reviewing all that, I mean do I really need to know all that? Well, maybe not. But it does show something that I

think is very important and that is that the book of proverbs is not haphazard. Somebody thought about how they were going to set this book up. It's not just, "I'll just pull the next proverb I happen to think of and write that down," and then the next one, and the next one, and the next one. But somebody actually arranged the book. This suggests then that we should read the book of proverbs as a book; there's a reason that the acrostic poem comes at the end. It could have been put anywhere but it's put at the end. There's a reason that the lengthy poems, the motivational poems, start the book. When we remember that the book is set up, that the contents of the book are called "riddles," I mean they're called "proverbs" as well or "sayings," but some of them at least are called "riddles." There's some sense in which the book is set up so that we will learn how to read proverbs as we read through the book. So that we begin with these poems in chapters 1 through 9 which are actually pretty easy to understand, there's not much subtlety there. They're pretty straight forward they're telling us what to do and what to avoid, and giving us reasons, and doing it in great detail, in much more detail than any individual proverb ever does. Proverbs you know are sort of a smushed language. But those first 9 chapters give us maybe time and leisure to think about things rather than finding everything compressed into just a very few words. So we read the book then, as a book, we study it as a book, which means we shouldn't just read through chapters 1 through 9 and say, "Okay I've read the forward now I can get on to the real proverbs." But, instead, we should actually study our way through chapters 1 to 9. Study these poems as carefully as we would study the Psalter, as carefully as we would study any individual proverb. We should allow them to frame and shape our understanding.

So as we read through the book when we come to chapter 30 and its mysteries, and there are some verses here that people argue about, we don't really know exactly why they're written the way they are, or even precisely what they're referring to. So, for example, to read this, "There are three things too wonderful

for me four which I don't understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship in the middle of the sea, the way of a man with a maid." Okay, I'm not quite sure what the last one has to do with the first three, which are all about things moving around. Well, if you read 10 commentaries on the book of Proverbs, you will probably find at least 8 explanations for that particular saying. Don't forget some of them are riddles.

We're not expected, I believe, to jump into chapter 30 until we have tried our best to understand what we find in chapters 1 through 29. The book itself is written in a way that enables us, in studying it, and reading through it, and working through it, to grow in our ability to understand. I'll talk about that in the beginning of our next lecture when we look at the first 6 verses of the book.

Transcribed by Hillary Rogers, Nate Johnson, Sam Huntington, Kristen Gandek,
Stevie Schweighardt and edited by Jessie Woodring
Edited by Ted Hildebrandt