

## Dr. Knut Heim, Proverbs, Lecture 2, Proverbs 1:1-7

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This is Dr. Knut Heim and his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number two, Proverbs chapter one, verses one through seven.

Welcome to lecture number two on the biblical book of Proverbs. In lecture one, we gave a general introduction into the various parts of the book, some background, authorship, raised some questions of content, and so on. But now in this second lecture, I want us to actually go to the very beginning, the opening verses, the opening seven verses of the book itself.

Verses one to seven in chapter one are in fact the book's own mini introduction to the whole book. And what I would like to do is actually just read those seven verses out now, and then I'm going to take us through an interpretation and application of what these introductory verses mean for the readers of the book. What the original compilers, whoever they were, were trying to do with this collection of collections in the book of Proverbs.

So here we go, the opening verse we've already heard. The Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel. For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, and for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity.

To teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge, and prudence to the young. Let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill. To understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction. You notice that I hesitated briefly, a short pause, just before I read the final verse in this section.

That's really because it's really verses one to six that are recognized by almost everybody as the actual introduction to the book, whereas verse seven seems to be a foundational maxim, a proverb that kind of encapsulates in many ways the theological connection of the intellectual enterprise to which the book invites its readers. I'll come back to that in a moment, but for now, I want us to actually take through a fairly detailed interpretation of the various kinds of things that these opening verses tell us as the book's later readers. But we are part of the implied readership of the book, because although the book, of course, was written for its original readers, its original audience, the contemporary readers of its latest collectors, nonetheless any author who starts writing something down, unless it

were an exam that is written for a particular professor or teacher at school, if someone writes something down they want this to be read again and again.

And in the case of great world literature, which the book of Proverbs certainly is, it's meant to be read as long as human culture endures. And here we are in a completely different continent, probably yourself as a reader, you might be in Africa, you might be in Asia, you might be in Europe, you might be in Australia. I'm here at the moment in North America.

Wherever we are, we are part of that intended readership. And this is what the book wants us to pick up. These Proverbs, not just the ones by Solomon, but all of them in the book, all 915 of them, are written for learning, for gaining instruction, to teach shrewdness, to let the wise learn, to let the discerning acquire skill, to understand the proverb and the figure.

So there's a lot of learning, acquisition, development, and intellectual growth to be done through the reading of this book. The content clearly is intellectual because, as we read in verse 2, it's about wisdom and instruction, understanding words of insight. The same in the beginning of verse 3, gaining instruction in wise dealing.

So, it's about the practical application of the intellectual riches to be gained. So, this book is not just, it's a lot about theory, but it is not just about theory. It is about theory and practical application of what is being learned.

Then in verse 3b, which I'm going to read again in a moment, comes really the heart of the application, of the usefulness, of the intended purpose of what is to be learned through the study, the reading and continuous reading and study of the book. And it is this, 3b, for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity. So, this trios of social values, justice, righteousness, and equity, clearly has to do with social interaction with other people.

It's quite literally about social justice and fairness in society. The book, although addressed to probably not just an intellectual but also a political and intellectual elite, is nonetheless concerned with the wellness, the well-being of all of society. It is about enabling its, yes, elitist readership to adopt a value system and practical habits that will make for social justice in the society of its time and in the modern day, our own society.

And of course, in the 21st century, where the world has become a global village, where we are electronically and almost instantly connected with each other across the world, this has not only a local and a regional or even a national dimension, but actually, for modern readers of the Book of Proverbs, this is about social justice at the global stage. The next two verses now talk a little bit more specifically, not about the purpose, which we've just been looking at, but about the intended audience of

the book, the intended readership of the book. And you will notice there are two distinctive kinds of readers that the book wants to entice through its intellectual allure.

And it's this, verse 4, to teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge, and prudence to the young. Who are the people addressed here? People who are, according to this particular translation, simple and young. I've mentioned the Hebrew word that is behind this translation here of the New Revised Standard Version which I find one of the best translations, especially for a scholarly reading of the biblical text.

It's not always super correct, but it's one of the very best that we have among many, many very good Bible translations across the world in all the different languages. But nonetheless, I want to criticize this particular translation. It's not specifically, there's nothing particularly wrong with translating *Petit* as simple, or as some other Bible translations have, naïve or immature or something like this.

But the intended readership here is not people who are intellectually handicapped. This is addressed to people who are perhaps intellectually immature because they are young and they have not been fully trained yet and have been socialized into a grown-up culture of its day. But this is about people who are, the *Petit* in Hebrew is someone who is, yes, maybe open to being influenced by other things, open to be sidetracked from the right path or whatever, but not because they are stupid or because they are weak-minded or anything like that, but because they are intellectually curious.

They are an open book on which other people can write, and that's exactly what the Book of Proverbs wants to do here. It wants to write on the tablet of the heart of its young readership. It wants these young people to engage in this intellectual adventure in order to help them develop a stance that will contribute positively to the well-being of society as a whole.

So, this is for clever people, this is for intelligent people, and this is for people who are willing and open to learning. This now brings us to verse 5, the second kind of readership, and here the mode of address in this opening versus changes indirectly, or indirectly I should say, addresses a particular other kind of readership, not the intellectually immature young people, but now it says, let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill. So, what we see here then is that not only is the Book of Proverbs addressed to young readers and those who are kind of at the beginning of the intellectual enterprise and their studies or whatever, but this is actually also explicitly addressed to people who are much further on in their intellectual development.

Since the 1980s or so, many people talk in adult education about Bloom's taxonomy of learning, where it's not just about head knowledge, but the higher kinds of

intellectual development help people to imaginatively, creatively engage with the things that they learn about, and also and especially to apply these things. And I think this is exactly what is happening here as well. This is also, this book is also addressed to adult learners, to people who have already achieved things in life, who've got a degree or two or whatever, a higher degree, or whatever it may be.

The aspiration of the book is to actually teach across a very wide intellectual and educational spectrum, from young, probably older children and teenagers, to well-established scholars. All of them can learn something from this book that will help them to make a positive contribution to society. I want to stop here for a moment, and I'm going to switch over my overhead projection to something that I often talk about in a variety of contexts because it is so close to my heart.

And as I change it over, I hope you'll be able to read it. Don't just read it yet, because I want to say a few more things from a personal perspective before I go on to some texts that have inspired me in my own intellectual development over many years now. But I want to share with you a personal story that goes right back to my own teenage years.

I can't remember exactly what age I was, but it would have been probably, I was probably about 15 or 16. And what had happened is I had, through a very good friend of mine at school, I had become a, how could you call it? I had a personal conversion experience, and I had become self-consciously Christian. I was, if you like, a young convert.

I was very excited about my faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, as they say, and all this sort of stuff. And very naturally, I began to tell everybody around me how wonderful this newfound Jesus was and how important it was to believe in him and to receive forgiveness of sins and all that sort of things. And to be honest, in my youthful enthusiasm and lack of wisdom, I probably was quite obnoxious sometimes to some of my friends and family members around me.

But this brings me, this is just the introduction to the episode I want to share with you. And what happened is, one day I talked to my grandfather, and I gave him what is sometimes called an evangelistic book. So, some author, some German pastor had written a book about faith in Jesus and everything else.

And as I gave my grandfather the book, my grandfather, again, a very wise, very intellectual man, thoroughly read the book, and then afterward, as he always would, he would give me books and I would read the books he recommended and so on. And we kind of teased each other intellectually and helped each other grow. Well, I think he helped me more to grow than I did him, of course.

But I gave him the book, he read it, and we discussed it afterward. And I said, so Granddad, how did you like the book? He said, well, it was okay and everything else, but he said, there's one thing that I disagree with. Oh, granddad, what's that? And he said, well, it's when the author says that if you don't believe in Jesus, you go to hell.

And I, there was me and my 15, 16-year-old petty, intellectually immature. I said, but granddad, that's the most important thing. If you don't believe in Jesus, you go to hell.

You know, as one does to one's granddad. And he kind of just smiled and looked at me and he said, well, Knut, when you grow older, you will change your mind about this. I said, oh, granddad, I'll never change my mind about this.

And he just looked and smiled a little bit more, and then he said this, Knut, if you can't learn anymore, you're old. Completely floored me. And to be honest, this was one of the key experiences in my personal intellectual development, and perhaps the most important influence on the way I approached life and learning new things for the rest of my life.

And it's probably one of the reasons why I began to study theology and then went on to do a higher degree and did a PhD in Oriental Studies, Ancient Near Eastern Studies, and so on, and was always open and interested in learning, not only from biblical texts, but also from other texts outside the Bible, from Babylonia, from Assyria, from Egypt, and so on. But now I want to fast forward. And there's a point, I'll come back to this.

This is very relevant to what I've just been saying, what we've just been reading from Proverbs 1, verse 5, this address to the wise. Fast forward almost 40 years later. So just imagine, here was my granddad.

I was 15, 16. My granddad, clearly an old man by this time, told me, that if you can't change your mind, you're old. Fast forward 40 years later.

It was my granddad's 96th birthday. He was still living in the south of Germany. I was already living; I was at the time living in London in the United Kingdom.

And I called him up for his birthday. And we had a very pleasant conversation. I congratulated him and I cheered him up.

And he was still very much intellectually with it, physically also still able to do everything for himself, just absolutely marvelous. But as part of our conversation, I reminded him of this anecdote, of this episode of what happened, just to encourage him, but also to kind of really express my gratitude to him. Because this had had such a deep influence on my life and my development.

And I really appreciated what he had done for me. So, I told him the story as I have just told you the story. And I came, and we were all talking on the phone, and I came to the punchline and I said, and then you said, if you can't change your mind anymore, you're old.

And I left a pregnant pause, into which my granddad said, I've changed my mind about that. I said, what? I was almost panicking. I've lived my life according to this, and now you're telling me that's wrong? And I said, what do you mean, Granddad? And he just said, you know what? You can still change your mind when you're old.

He floored me yet again. And now why am I telling you this story? Because this is precisely what this text is talking about. While verse 4 tells us that there's enough here in this book to satisfy the intellectual curiosity of the intellectually immature and the young teenagers, young adults, or whatever, but this book also contains deep intellectual truth and wisdom that can be beneficial to you.

When you've got all the good degrees, all the wisdom, all the achievements in the world, in middle age and old age, any time of your year, of your life, this book can teach you something to have a great life, a fulfilled life, a meaningful life, and not only for yourself, but a life that will change the lives of others. So, think about that. What an amazing book we have here that invites us onto this intellectual journey.

So, as we continue in Lecture 2 with our focus on the introduction to the Book of Proverbs, we have now realized that the book is telling us that what it wants to teach us is, number one, really important. This has an impact in the real world, not just on ourselves, but on everybody around us and wider society. And we've seen that this can have a global dimension in the 21st century.

What I now want to do with the help of a range of brief texts that have inspired me over the years in my own intellectual engagement with research, writing, the study of the Bible, art history, politics, and all the many different things that I'm interested in, is this. The first that I want to read to you, and you can follow it perhaps if you can see it on the screen, is a poem by William Butler Yeats called *The Second Coming* written in 1919, that is, in the year. Well, it was published in the year after World War I had come to its bloody end.

And this is what he says in the poem. Things fall apart, the center cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned. The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.

Why is a poem like this relevant to the Book of Proverbs? I think it's because of this. Because the contents of the Book of Proverbs matter. And the ability of those whom

W.B. Yeats recalls the best of his time, if they lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity, then all the learning of the world will not do much good if we are not willing to apply it with intentionality, with a strong will, with passion, and a willingness to overcome obstacles.

And these obstacles may not just be extraneous geophysical matters, but actually human obstacles, the worst are full of, as Yeats calls it, passionate intensity. Now remember, Yeats wrote this in 1919, but the poem in many ways was prophetic of what would happen just over a decade or so later in the 1930s, and then culminating in World War II in 1939 to 1945, with a build-up of human tragedy at a scale that had never happened before in the history of the world, with millions of people dead all over the world, and six million Jews killed across Europe. The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.

And so, what I want to kind of encourage you to reflect on as we continue our engagement with the Book of Proverbs is that the things we engage in here truly matter, and what we do with them truly matters. Our faith and our intellectual engagements with the biblical truths that we study do not exist in a vacuum. They have connections to the real world and to things that matter to a lot of people, that can make a difference in life and death to dozens, to hundreds, to thousands, to millions.

I want to continue with a second text and really connect the intellectual enterprise with worship and what happens in the church when, as Christian or Jewish believers in a synagogue, we come together to study the Word of God, to reflect on it, to pray together, to ask God to interact with us and to intervene in the life of the world. And hopefully also where we ourselves offer ourselves to God to be part of his tools, of the instruments that he uses in order to make the world a better place. This is what Annie Dillard says in her beautiful book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, published in 1974, a beautiful series of reflections that actually won her the Pulitzer Prize, one of the most prestigious literary prizes in the world.

And this is just from one of the meditations that she has in the book, and she says this, On the whole, I do not find Christians outside the catacombs sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church.

We should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares. They should lash us to our pews.

For the sleeping, God may wake someday and take offense. Or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return. I still remember the moment when I first read this, and it pierced me to my heart, because it is so easy to take God for granted, to take our faith, the salvation that we have received, the forgiveness of our sins, the hope we have for the future for granted, and not realize that as we interact with God, we are interacting with the most powerful being in the universe.

A being that has standards that far exceed our own. A being that has not only saved us, but has now invited us into a fellowship and community of believers to make a difference, not just for ourselves, but for the world. The church exists not primarily for the benefit of its members.

The church exists, the synagogue exists, for the benefit of the world at large, even more for non-believers than for those whom church people or synagogue people consider to be the insiders. And these things matter, because if the best lack conviction, if they just live for themselves, if they are just consumers of the great and wonderful gifts of God, then this world may well, in the words of Yeats, fall apart all around us, while we are enjoying the benefits of God's goodness. I will come back to this later in this lecture series when we look at a number of verses from the book of Proverbs in chapter 24, where this becomes very, very relevant.

So just hold that thought as we continue in the lecture series. I finally want to go to another text. This is a slightly different text.

The other two are obviously literary texts. One a poem, the other one a kind of beautiful, almost quasi-poetic reflection. The third one is actually an intellectual text.

It was written by Nicholas Maxwell and published in the London Review of Education. Maxwell is an educationalist, a professor at the University of London, I believe if I remember correctly. And one of his big things, he writes from a decidedly non-Christian, from a secular perspective.

But one of his big things is that university learning is not just about the intellect. It is not just about knowledge. But it is about the wisdom on how to apply that knowledge.

And I recommend the article that he has written if you can ever get a hold of it. It is an absolutely marvelous article, very, very inspiring. But here now I just want to share with you one particular, kind of particularly important paragraph from the conclusion at the end of his article.

He says this. Inquiry devoted primarily to the pursuit of knowledge is then grossly and damagingly irrational when judged from the standpoint of contributing to human welfare by intellectual means. At once the question arises, what would a kind



of inquiry be like that is devoted in a genuinely rational way to promoting human welfare by intellectual means? I shall call such a hypothetical kind of inquiry wisdom inquiry to stand in contrast to knowledge inquiry.

Can you see how directly this relates to our text? For gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity. He calls it contributing to human welfare by intellectual means. That's exactly what the book of Proverbs wants to do.

And that is exactly what I believe university education, seminary education, and any kind of education is ultimately, or should ultimately be about. And this is perhaps one of the great things that all of us can take away from the book of Proverbs. And I want to encourage you, if you are a teacher, if you are a pastor, if you are an intellectual, from henceforth, do not continue to pursue knowledge for its own sake.

Pursue it in order to contribute to human welfare. And do so wisely. And read the book of Proverbs because it can help you to achieve just that.

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