

Dr. August Konkle, Proverbs, Session 1

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This is Dr. August Conkle in his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number one. Where is wisdom to be found? Proverbs as wisdom literature.

Hello, my name is August Konkle. I am professor of Old Testament at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario. My graduate degree is from Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, and I also graduated earlier on from Providence Theological Seminary.

I am looking forward to us exploring together the book of Proverbs. Proverbs is a kind of linguistic phenomena that is present in every single language. I am a farm boy, and one of the first Proverbs I ever learned was, don't cry over spilled milk.

Now for me that made perfectly good sense, because you see, I grew up having to actually milk cows. You sat down on a stool, a one-legged stool actually, it's more flexible, and you got a pail between your legs and you milked into the pail. But the cow didn't always like everything that was going on, and she would kick.

And sometimes the pail went flying, and there your efforts were on the barn floor, and what you did is picked up the pail and started milking again. So the proverb made good sense, don't cry over spilled milk. When it doesn't go the way that you think it should, you just keep on and try again.

Every culture has Proverbs, and of course what the Proverbs mean, how they're understood, and how they're used, depends on the culture itself. I picked up a few of them from Africa, and I'll leave you to just ponder these. Only a fool tests the depth of a river with both feet.

Well, you can think of various ways in which that might be appropriate. But here's one that would be very suitable within the book of Proverbs itself. Knowledge is like a garden.

It is not cultivated, it cannot be harvested. Now that's what we're going to learn the first thing here in Proverbs, is that wisdom, which is also called knowledge, is something that must be learned. That kind of brings us to the point that we want to talk about, namely the concept of wisdom.

We place the book of Proverbs within a category that we translate as wisdom. It comes from the Hebrew word *hokmah*, which I will write here because it is used very, very commonly. It's a word that has a fairly wide range of meanings.

It talks about a knowledge or a skill. Sometimes that is a technical knowledge, such as the ability to get mining information from the ground. But sometimes it is a life skill, knowing how to live.

And that, of course, is where the book of Proverbs comes in. Wisdom in our language has to do with making decisions. Am I going to do the right thing? That's much too narrow a concept for what we mean by the word hokmah.

The word hokmah has as its common theme in all wisdom literature, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. So, wisdom begins with an attitude. Wisdom begins with a disposition.

It is learning that disposition and then the conduct that must flow from it that is at the heart of wisdom. There are three books in the scriptures that we refer to as wisdom. One of them is Proverbs, one of them is Ecclesiastes, and one of them is Job.

And just as a brief introduction, I might distinguish them this way. Proverbs deals with how we deal with daily life and all of its questions. Ecclesiastes deals more with the question of why.

What is life actually all about? What is it in life that can give significance, that can give meaning, that matters? And the book of Job is actually about what? What is it that we really know? What do we understand about ourselves and about the universe? Now, most of the readers of Job think that it's actually about suffering. Well, suffering is the question that is used to address the larger question, which is underlying most of the poetry and discussion of Job. And the larger question is, well, what do we really know about suffering? And how should we respond to suffering? That's the deeper question that gets answered in Job, or that is at least addressed in Job.

But our concern is going to be Proverbs and to know wisdom as it is helpful in order to understand the way in which we should live. And so, the whole book of Proverbs begins with several purpose statements, actually four of them or five of them to be exact, to know wisdom and discipline, to understand words of knowledge, to acquire the discipline of insight, righteousness, justice, and equity, and to give the gullible craftiness to give the youth informed discretion. So that is set out as the objective of what this book is supposed to do for you.

Wisdom, then, is a means of knowing the will of God. What is the will of God? Not only in the larger sense of the decisions I make that include my vocation and the big life decisions but even the smaller ones as to how we deal with all the ordinary events of life, such as how I handle my situation at work or how I handle my situation at home. In the scriptures, there are three ways of knowing God.

They are given through the three parts of the revelation itself, which is called in Hebrew the Torah, the Nevi'im, and the Ketuvim. Torah means instruction. It usually refers to the first five books of the Bible, and it is the instruction that Moses gave concerning God, his world, his relationship to his people, and the fundamental truth that we need to know.

The prophets took this teaching and applied it to their life situations. So, their question always was how and where the people were obeying the covenant that Moses had laid out with all of its values and its terms and the ways in which they were not. So those are two fundamental ways of knowing about the scriptures.

And both of these, of course, might use proverbs. So, for instance, you can find in the prophets a proverb, the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the teeth of the children have become blunted. This is a proverb that's used in the time of the exile.

Their complaint is that we are suffering for the sins of our fathers, and therefore it's unfair and unjust that we should be in exile. In addition to the teaching, the Torah, and the prophets, which is the preaching such as that which took place to the people who were in exile, wisdom is a third means of revelation. So, in Jeremiah 18:18, there are three sources of authority that are going to be used against Jeremiah.

The law, comes from the priest, the counsel, which comes from the wise, and the word, which comes from the prophet. So, these are three areas, three means, literary means, by which the word of God comes to us as humans. Ezekiel, in Ezekiel 7:26, says really the same thing.

He says that they will seek a vision from the prophets, they will seek the law from the priest, but it will perish, and there will be no counsel from the elders. So, these were the typical ways in which revelation from God could be found. Now, Proverbs of course isn't all proverbs.

So, we're going to talk a little bit about the ways in which wisdom is classified. There are numerous words, as we shall encounter them in proverbs, that are used to give the content of what wisdom is about, to give the essence of what wisdom is about. But in proverbs, we kind of have two divisions.

The first nine chapters, prepare us for the numerous hundreds of collections of proverbs, which follow in chapters 10 through 31. So those first nine chapters, we really refer to as didactic wisdom. That is instruction for how to lead a proper life, a virtuous life.

Texts to prepare for understanding the ideals of faith and of culture. They're all constructed as teaching, and in this case, the teaching of a father to a child. That is probably the way in which most of teaching took place in ancient Israel, since the

literary means of reading were not readily available to anyone in ancient culture, other than those associated generally with the king and his court and the institutions associated with it.

But these teachings were written down, and these teachings were embedded in the mind so that they could be remembered and taught, and some of them preserved, not only in Israel, but outside of Israel. And in the book of proverbs, we're going to encounter a whole series of proverbs that have an obvious literary similarity with an Egyptian writing called the teaching of Amenemope. This would be one of those didactic kinds of wisdom.

But there is also a critical wisdom that reflects on these big questions of life. As we have mentioned, the questions of what is valuable in life, what has significance, what has meaning, and questions of what it is that we can actually know about life, sometimes Job and Ecclesiastes are referred to as critical wisdom. There are numerous kinds of proverbs.

In the English language, a proverb is something fairly specific. But in Hebrew, we have something called a mashal, which can take numerous forms all the way from an extended metaphor, a kind of a parable, and sometimes a poem, all manner of things are called a mashal. And we encounter them in various places.

I've given a couple of examples here. Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth saying, physician, heal thyself. Meaning, well, do miracles here like you did over in Capernaum.

Or no prophet is accepted in his own country. In reference to stories of like those of Elisha, who found a sympathetic person right in the heart of the territory of Jezebel among the Phoenicians. Or Naaman, who was Assyrian, who came to seek the healing that could come through God and came to accept Yahweh while the Israelites did not.

So, some of our examples that we might call a mashal, the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, or something like the parable of the lost son or the prodigal son, as he's often referred to. All these things come under that categorization. Typically, though, proverbs are short and memorable.

And I'm sure that in the English language, we're all familiar with some of these. If it isn't broken, don't fix it. The child is the father of the man.

A stitch in time saves nine. I always like that one because there's many a time when there's been a little thread that has come loose, and I don't have time for it, and I just clip it off. And then pretty soon, you need nine more threads in order to fix it up.

That's a good one. But usually, aphorisms are characterized by assonance and ambiguity. And here's one that I just love.

This one comes from Ecclesiastes. It's chapter seven, verse one. And I'm going to give it to you in Hebrew, as I have transliterated it here.

So, you can see the tov, tov, and the yom, and yivaldo, and the way in which this resonates. Now, what does that mean? Well, we can translate it as,
a good name is better than oil,
and the day of death than the day of birth.

And what does that mean? Proverbs are never simply self-evident.

They're always true in application to a particular situation. And in this case, in chapter seven, verse one, it is clear that what the preacher is talking about is this question of, what is it that's worthwhile? Why should life be lived? And his point here is that the one thing that we all leave in life is a legacy. And that legacy is our reputation.

How did people know us and understand us as a person? And so, you're all excited when a child is born, because it's a wonderful thing, and we are sad when we lose a good person and a friend. But the preacher wants to look at it from another point of view. When a child is born, you have all sorts of hopes and aspirations for that child.

And when they die, leaving behind a reputation that is respected by everyone, then of course, that legacy is complete. It can no longer be ruined. A good reputation can be ruined in a moment.

But once one has completed life, then that reputation is fixed. And so, it should be a kind of goal you look towards. And then, of course, the preacher is a whole bunch of other proverbs that illustrate that point.

So, we use them because they're memorable. We use them because they express a viewpoint that is true. Now it's true in a particular circumstance only.

Distance makes the heart grow fonder. Out of sight, out of mind. And you say, well, how's that possible? Well, they're both true.

It just depends on what circumstance you're talking about. And they express observations of order. And we observe order in nature, among plants, among animals.

But there is order in social relationships as well. Order that can't actually be altered. So, these days, there's a whole lot of talk about the way in which we should completely reorder family, and we should no longer think about nuclear family.

But the fact is, it's not going to work. Because there is an order that's inviolable. It's just the essence of what we are as humans and as people.

Fools jump in where angels fear to tread. Opportunity only knocks once. Other examples of sayings we remember that are memorable, but really kind of say the opposite things.

So, what we're going to do is look at the book of Proverbs. And just give a brief outline of Proverbs here in the end of this first little talk. The purpose of Proverbs, then the instruction of wisdom, which is most of the first nine chapters.

Where Lady Wisdom calls from the towers in chapter one. And where she prepares the great banquet, the feast for all to partake of in chapter nine. Then we have the collections of Proverbs.

In some way or another, they belong to Solomon, but they are clear, distinct collections. So, we're going to look at the collections from 10.1 to 22.16, which is exactly 375 Proverbs. We'll talk about why that is true.

There are the collections of the wise, more collections of the wise. The collections from the time of Hezekiah. So clearly some of these collections involved the king's court.

Hezekiah, of course, is 250 years after Solomon. And the book of Proverbs was still in the process of being composed at that time. And then there is an appendix.

The words of Acher, the sayings, numerical sayings, the mother of King Lemuel, and finally, the wisdom of strength. So that's a basic bird's eye view of the book of Proverbs as we're going to be looking at it in our next lectures.

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