

## The Wisdom Literature

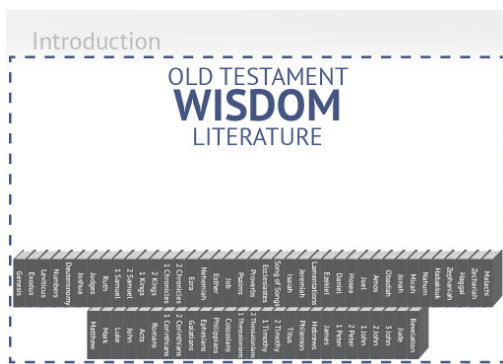
## Introduction

In this lesson, we introduce the Old Testament's wisdom literature. When we refer to these books as the wisdom books, it's important to understand that the whole Old Testament and New Testament contain wisdom. From Genesis to Malachi and from Matthew to Revelation, the writers teach us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. But the Old Testament books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes focus so much on wisdom that we actually call them the "wisdom literature." The Old Testament sages had a very specific reality in mind when they talked about wisdom, and if we miss that reality we lose much of their valued direction.

## The Hebrew Idea of Wisdom

The word translated as *wisdom* in the Bible is the Hebrew word *chokmâh*. It was used throughout the Old Testament to talk about people who did things with skill. It describes the work of those people who embroidered the priest's garments back in the book of Exodus. These garments were to be beautiful because they reflected God's nature and His work. So God told Moses to select people who did embroidery with *châkam*. They embroidered with great *skill*. Other people who did embroidery would look at the priest's garment and say, "Now *that's* embroidery. I do embroidery but not like that. That shows a skill level I can only wish for." Skilled carpenters and parents and leaders were said to do their work with *châkam*.

In the book of Proverbs we see the word *wisdom* over and over again. It is used to describe how people perform many of life's functions with skill. But when these proverbs refer to a person as wise they describe someone who lives his or her whole life with *châkam*. Just as a person would look at the priest's robe and say, "Now that's how it ought to be done," so people who looked at a human life that was lived with wisdom would say, "That's how life should be lived." Because that person lives her life with *chokmâh*, she is known as a wise person. Wise people learn to live skillfully because they live as God intended us to live.



## The Hebrew Idea of Wisdom

חִכְמָה *chokmâh* (*wisdom*):  
"skill."



## The Hebrew Idea of Wisdom



## Proverbs

- Primarily a collection of wise sayings
- Words of authority inspired by God

## WRITERS

Solomon, other sages

## Proverbs

## PURPOSE

To provide a catalog of wise sayings to guide us in life.

To exercise the mind and build mental skill and strength.

## Proverb:

Taunt: parable.

Stretches the reader's thinking process in a teasing or challenging manner



In the Old Testament, a wise life requires commitment to God's Law. So when you read about wisdom in the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and Job, they are referring to people who have skillfully applied God's teaching to their lives. That's why Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10 claim, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge." Only when we see God for who He is and live as He intended, do we have any hope of living a wise life.

## Proverbs

The book of Proverbs is primarily a collection of wise sayings. Solomon wrote many of them, but there are collections of proverbs from other sages as well. That's why you'll see statements in the book of Proverbs that introduce others who wrote or collected some of these wise sayings. Regardless of who wrote or collected them, we believe they are words of authority because God inspired all of Scripture. We appreciate the sages' astute observations of life and their beautifully crafted proverbs, but we never forget that the wisdom they contain comes from a much wiser source.

Proverbs 1:1–7 introduces the purpose of these collections of proverbs. Solomon used a series of infinitives to state the reasons why these proverbial statements were gathered together. The list includes: "To know wisdom and instruction, to discern the sayings of understanding, to receive instruction, to give prudence . . . , to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles" (NASB).

This list includes two reasons for gathering these proverbs into a book. One is to provide a catalog of wise sayings to guide us in life. But secondly the proverbs function like a mental gymnasium. The terms "know," "discern," "receive," "give prudence," and "understand" are action words. If we are to grasp the "wisdom," "instruction," "sayings of understanding," "proverbs," and "wise riddles," we have to develop mental skill. The word *proverb* is also translated "taunt" and "parable." The idea of a taunt (Isaiah 14:4) is that it stretches the reader's thinking process in a teasing or challenging manner. This literature exercises the mind and is designed to build mental skill and strength.

Writing a proverb demanded two skills. First the sages made an astute observation of life. As they observed, they formed ideas about what they saw. Then they skillfully crafted that observation into a proverb. Because the writers wanted their readers to

## Proverbs

- Primarily a collection of wise sayings
- Words of authority inspired by God
- **Writing proverbs required 2 skills:**

## WRITERS

Solomon, other sages

## OBSERVE

Observe life and form ideas about it

## CRAFT

Craft the observation into a proverb that doesn't give up its meaning easily

develop mental skills, their proverbs rarely gave up their meaning easily. So if you read a proverb, and it doesn't make sense to you right away, that's by design. A lazy reader will miss the benefit of many proverbs, but the skillful reader will learn how to live a more skillful life.

The book is titled Proverbs, not Promises. For instance, Proverbs 22:6, "Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it" (NASB) is a proverb. It is not a promise. Proverbs are wise observations about how life works. Proverbs 22:6 teaches that we increase the probability of a child who doesn't depart from God's way if we raise the child in that way. But a proverb doesn't guarantee results; it doesn't make promises. God gave us freedom of choice, and life isn't always predictable and controllable. But we can increase the probability of things happening, and these proverbs teach us to live in such a way that we increase the probability of getting what we want out of life.

The book of Proverbs contains two sections. Chapters 1–9 introduce the proverbial statements. Then the actual proverbs begin in chapter 10 and go through chapter 31. The whole book is written in poetry and is wise literature, but the collections of proverbial statements don't begin until chapter 10.

## Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes is another book that requires our full mental engagement; and some readers wonder what the writer is doing in this book. It describes how difficult life is and makes life seem so hopeless and meaningless. Its theme is introduced in Ecclesiastes 1:2, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" (NASB). Or, as the New International Version translates it, "‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’" Life is like modern technology. As soon as you figure it out, it changes. You get things moving in the right direction, and life makes a U-turn.

Ecclesiastes is full of twists and turns and dead-end streets and contradictions. You read a statement that says one thing, and the next statement says exactly the opposite. It's a troubling book. It has been suggested that the writer very cleverly designed the book so that it reads like life is lived. The dead-end streets and contradictions in the book mirror those in life.

## Proverbs

- Primarily a collection of wise sayings
- Words of authority inspired by God
- Writing proverbs required 2 skills.
- Proverbs are not promises.

## WRITERS

Solomon, other sages

## OUTLINE

## Chapters 1-9

The proverbial statements are introduced.

## Chapters 10-31

The proverbs are given.

## Ecclesiastes

- Ecclesiastes describes how difficult life is and makes life seem so hopeless and meaningless.

## THEME

All is vanity; **everything is meaningless.**

"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."  
Ecclesiastes 1:2 (NASB)

"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."  
Ecclesiastes 1:2 (NIV)

## Ecclesiastes

- Ecclesiastes describes how difficult life is and makes life seem so hopeless and meaningless.
- Ecclesiastes is a troubling book filled with contradictions.

## OUTLINE

## Ecclesiastes 1:1-11:6

Life is beyond comprehension. One must learn to live happily in a world one will never understand.

## Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8

Life cannot be controlled. One must learn to live happily in a world one cannot control.

Think about Ecclesiastes' outline. The first section in 1:1–11:6 says life is beyond comprehension. We will never figure it all out. So we must learn to live happily in a world we will never fully understand. The second part of the book (11:7–12:8) says we will never control life. It's not under our control. So we must learn to live happily in a world we cannot control.

Here is a riddle to engage the skillful mind. Ecclesiastes teaches us that we can neither understand nor control life. But we just read that Proverbs says we do have some control. We can understand life enough to live wisely. Proverbs presents an "if/then" approach to life and Ecclesiastes presents an "if/who knows" approach.

So which book should we believe? We should believe both. If we read Proverbs and Ecclesiastes as two ends of a spectrum, we have a broader understanding of what life is like. The wise person says, "I need to live my life as God teaches because it will increase the probability that I will live a good life." But the wise person also realizes there are aspects of life we can't possibly understand; and we acknowledge that we do not have absolute control over our own life and even less control over others' lives. Things happen that we can't understand or control or fix.

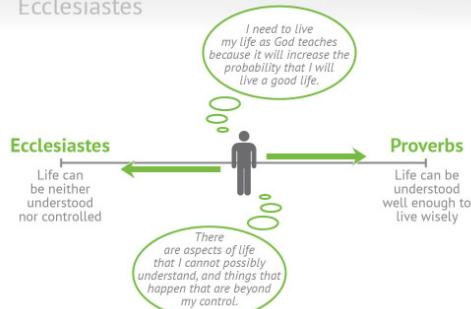
## Job

Job is the third book of wisdom; and it wrestles with the question of why good and godly people suffer. The book opens by introducing Job as a man who is so godly that Satan challenged God to test Job to see if his faith was genuine. God allowed Satan to strip Job of all his assets—including his family and health—to see if Job would abandon his commitment to God.

Job's friends came to comfort and counsel him. They had good intentions, but they were misguided counselors. They were convinced that Job was suffering because he had sinned.

As you read the three dialogues between Job and his friends, the tension mounts. His counselors try to convince Job to confess his sin, and Job keeps defending his innocence. Because the author of Job tells us what is going on in the first chapter, we know why Job is suffering. But Job and his friends are looking at life the way we have to process it. They were left to figure out why Job was suffering. If we read the book from their perspective, we can understand why the debates got so heated.

## Ecclesiastes



## Job

## QUESTION

Why do good and godly people suffer?

- Satan challenges God to **test Job's faith**.
- God allows Satan to strip Job of all his assets.



Job, a godly man



## Proverbs

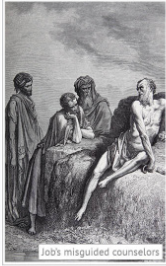
## QUESTION

Why do good and godly people suffer?

Satan challenges God to **test Job's faith**.

When we encounter suffering we **need not limit the explanation** of its source to evil in the sufferer's life.

Job's righteousness and faith in God prove to be genuine.



Job's misguided counselors

The book's final chapters (38–42) are devoted to a dialogue between God and Job. God told Job he was not suffering because he was evil but for a much higher purpose. Job's righteousness and his faith in God were sorely tested and proven to be genuine.

Most of us have thought at some time in life that we are suffering because we offended God. Or even worse, we draw that conclusion about others. Job's debates with his counselors should teach us that when we encounter suffering we need not limit our explanation of its source to evil in the sufferer's life. Job struggled with his faith in God's goodness and he complained bitterly to God. But then He listened to God's counsel and restored his faith in his good God.

## Conclusion

Developing skill takes time and effort. Skilled carpenters, musicians, scholars, or parents developed that skill. The Old Testament wisdom literature tells us that the skill required to live a wise life begins with our reverence for God. We are more apt to navigate life's unknowable and uncontrollable path well when we develop the skill of trusting God and reading the map He has provided in His Holy Scriptures.

## Conclusion

