

# READ SCRIPTURE WORKSHOP

## How to read Wisdom Literature

Welcome to our first *READ SCRIPTURE WORKSHOP*! In this workshop series, we will be exploring the principles necessary to correctly interpret God's Word.

In our first workshop in this series, we looked at what are genre categories in the Bible's different books and what basic method we can use to rightly interpret Scripture. We saw that there is a correct method of observation, to interpretation and finally to application.

Today, we'll be looking specifically at the Biblical genre of Wisdom Literature.

### WORKSHOP OUTLINE

1. Introduction (5 mins)
2. The Genre of Wisdom Literature (5 mins)
3. Proverbs | Wisdom for Living Well (25 mins)
4. Breakout Discussion Groups (20 mins)
5. Job | Wisdom for Struggling with Suffering (20 mins)
6. VIDEO: The Book of Job (10 mins)
7. Breakout Discussion Groups (20 mins)
8. Ecclesiastes | Wisdom in the Balance (5 mins)
9. VIDEO: Overview of Ecclesiastes (10 mins)
10. Conclusion (5 mins)

### PRAY

---

## THE GENRE OF WISDOM LITERATURE

The 3 major books of Wisdom in the Bible are Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. These are the books we will look at in this workshop for the sake of time, but there are other places in the Bible where you might find "wisdom" writings such as in James, Psalms and some even consider the Song of Songs to be wisdom writing for lovers.

### Definition of Wisdom Literature

The ESV Study Bible gives us a clear and short definition of wisdom:

“The skill in the art of godly living.”

Or more fully, wisdom is “that orientation which allows one to live in harmonious accord with God’s ordering of the world.”<sup>1</sup>

So, the Bible’s wisdom literature is meant to help us become skillful in the art of godly living.

## Distinctive Marks of Wisdom Literature

- A keen interest in the way the world works, our place in the world, and how things operate under God’s sovereign care.
- Most Wisdom Literature is poetry, but not all poetic material is Wisdom Literature. One of the most important things to note about poetry is that poets think in images. It is the imagery that is important and that conveys the meaning. (e.g. the Lord is my shepherd - Psa. 23)
- Wisdom literature often uses hyperbolic language to convey a thought or point more forcefully.

## Unifying Themes

You’ll notice these themes in every book of Wisdom Literature:

- The fear of the Lord
- The limits of human wisdom
- The righteous and the wicked in relation to God
- Grappling with suffering
- The nature of true piety

## Wisdom Literature’s Function

Wisdom Literature helps us navigate life in the tension of the “already-but-not-yet”. We’ve **already** been made new in Christ and given a new nature. However, we are **not yet** in the eternal state and still wrestle with the brokenness of the world and ourselves due to sin. **Until that day in glory, wisdom literature helps God’s people navigate the pitfalls of life.**

Derek Kidner helpfully notes about Wisdom Literature:

“Where the bulk of the Old Testament calls us simply to obey and to believe, this part of it... summons us to think hard as well as humbly; to keep our eyes open, to use our conscience and our common sense, and not to shirk the most disturbing questions.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> ESV Study Bible, p.866

<sup>2</sup> Derek Kidner, The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes: An Introduction to Wisdom Literature, 11.

## Wisdom as Polemic

Some scholars have noted the similarities between the Bible's wisdom literature and some of the writings of the surrounding pagan nations of the Ancient Near East (ANE). For example, the ancient Egyptian work, *The Instruction of Amenemope* from the 13th century B.C. has marked similarities to Proverbs 22-24. There are cuneiform texts from Mesopotamia that wrestle with the problem of a "righteous sufferer" like Job. Psalm 104 seems to share a lot in common with an ancient Egyptian hymnody. And many scholars have seen connections with Aramaic wisdom literature and even later Greek writings. This has led many critical scholars to be skeptical of the Bible's wisdom literature and think that the Biblical authors just copied their surrounding cultures.

However, far from this sort of critical position, the truth of the matter is that the Biblical authors demonstrate that they inhabited and challenged their contemporary cultural milieu. **The questions that ancient Israelites had to wrestle with were not unlike the questions that the Egyptians, Babylonians or Syrians were asking as well.** They participated in the wider culture of their day and brought the Bible's worldview to bear on that culture. Many scholars have noted that the Bible's wisdom literature is unrivalled in its scope, originality and profundity by the ANE writings.

The Biblical authors were doing what we should continue to do today - the task of cultural apologetics - giving a reason for the hope in us to the culture around us.

**The Bible's Wisdom Literature prepares us to give an answer to the world's folly by giving us God's wisdom for life.**

## REVIEW: General Rules of Interpretation

The same general rules of interpretation that we covered in our first Read Scripture workshop of Observation, Interpretation and Application still apply. However, they are applied in a way that is sensitive to the genre of Wisdom Literature. To recap:

1. **OBSERVATION** - Context is King
2. **INTERPRETATION** - Move from Big to Small
3. **APPLICATION** - Don't be Unmoved by God's Word

---

We must always move from Observation to Interpretation and then to Application. The better your observations, the better your interpretation, and the better your application.

# 1. PROVERBS | Wisdom for Living Well

## What are Proverbs?

**Proverbs are parables, riddles or short pithy ('full of meaning') sayings that are not designed to spoon-feed the reader but rather to prick him/her into deeper thought and consideration by use of word pictures, analogies or sharp brevity.** Derek Kidner comments,

"...the very form demands a sweeping statement and looks for a hearer with his wits about him. We need no telling that a maxim like 'Many hands make light work' is not the last word on the subject since 'Too many cooks spoil the broth.' Just so, Proverbs is not afraid to put two clashing counsels side by side..."<sup>3</sup>

Their refusal to explain themselves and use of similes and metaphors call for prolonged reflection to unpack them.

## Forms of Proverbs

- **Descriptive Proverbs** - general observations about life
  - Prov. 10:1b - A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother.
- **Comparative Proverbs** - popularly stated as "X is better than Y"
  - Prov. 15:16 - Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and trouble with it.
- **Prescriptive Proverbs** - the right response to a situation or direct instruction
  - Prov. 20:22 - Do not say, "I will repay evil"; wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you.
- **Warning Proverbs** - alert us to dangers
  - Prov. 24:33-34 - A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.
- **Insight Proverbs** - help us "see" something more clearly. For example, about the lingering influence of gossip on us:
  - The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body. (Proverbs 26:22)

---

<sup>3</sup> Kidner, The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, 26

## An Outline of Proverbs

While some may think of Proverbs as just a collection of haphazardly arranged fortune-cookie-like sayings, it actually has a very intentional and orderly arrangement. Derek Kidner offers a helpful outline for Proverbs:

- **Chapters 1-9 | A Fatherly Approach**: exhortations for the young and poetic metaphor to encourage following Lady Wisdom
- **Chapters 10 - 22:16 | A Plain Man's Approach**: Solomon's collection of sentence-sayings. Life's regularities, oddities, dangers, and delights, noted, compared and evaluated
- **Chapters 22:17 - 24:34 | More Fatherly Teachings**: two groups of wise men's exhortations
- **Chapters 25-29 | More Sentence-Sayings**: gleanings from Solomon compiled by Hezekiah's men
- **Chapter 30 | An Observer's Approach**: musings on the hidden Creator and on the idiosyncrasies of His creatures
- **Chapter 31 | A Motherly Approach**: a mother's home-truths and a wife's example

The book of Proverbs opens with a father's advice to his son to follow Lady Wisdom and closes with the advice of a mother to her son about a Lady of Wisdom.

## Key Themes

- **The Sovereignty of God**
  - The lot is cast into the lap,  
but its every decision is from the LORD.  
(Proverbs 16:33)
- **Creation's Order**
  - **Common Grace**  
The hearing ear and the seeing eye,  
The Lord has made them both.  
(Proverbs 20:12)
  - **General Principles**  
By wisdom a house is built,  
and by understanding it is established;  
by knowledge the rooms are filled  
with all precious and pleasant riches.  
(Proverbs 24:3-4)
- **The Experience of Life**

- Disaster pursues sinners,  
but the righteous are rewarded with good.  
(Proverbs 13:21)

## THE KEYS TO PROVERBS | Chapters 1 - 9

The opening of Proverbs sets forth the purpose of the book in Chapter 1:1-7.

To know **wisdom** and **instruction**,  
to understand words of insight...  
(verse 2)

**WISDOM** - The word 'wisdom' (ḥokmâ) is the ability to understand the way God designed life to work and skillfully respond with the appropriate action. It was applied to artists and craftsmen in Exodus 31:1-3 who had ḥokmâ - "skill or applied knowledge". Wisdom allows one to become skillful in navigating life, by understanding God's justice and divine order which derives from His righteous character.

**INSTRUCTION** - Paired with wisdom is the word 'instruction' (mûsār). It is also translated as "discipline" because it refers to a chastening lesson that corrects moral faults and shapes one's character.

These two concepts of wisdom and instruction/discipline are central to the book of Proverbs. Its goal is that we might come to know them, not in a theoretical way but a practical way that is learned through a variety of life experiences.<sup>4</sup>

### The Fear Of The Lord

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;  
fools despise wisdom and instruction.  
(verse 7)

In verse 7 we see the starting point of true wisdom according to the book of Proverbs (and the Bible as a whole). What is it? It is the fear of Yahweh - the holy reverence of the One True God. This is the basis of all true wisdom. If you do not fear God, you will be a fool. **Note that verse 2 says that fools (the opposite of the wise) are those who despise wisdom and instruction or discipline.** Richard Belcher Jr.'s comment is helpful:

"The fear of the LORD refers primarily to a subjective response of humility, love and trust in God so that a person is willing to submit his or her life to the ways of God. It is a God-centred view of life that includes a reverence for God. As the beginning of

---

<sup>4</sup> Richard P. Belcher Jr, Finding Favour in the Sight of God, 19–20.

knowledge, the fear of the LORD is the first and controlling principle of a person's life. Without it wisdom, as defined by God, is not attainable.”<sup>5</sup>

This Proverb also makes use of a tool of Hebrew poetry called “assonance” - which is the repetition of a similar vowel sound. Verse 7a says:

yirat yehvah re'shit da'at

The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge.

The repetition of the “a” sound as well as the “at” sound at the beginning and end of the poetic line help make it memorable and serves as a motto for the book.<sup>6</sup>

**The fear of the Lord is the key to Proverbs and wisdom in the Bible.** Do you want to have wisdom? You have to fear the Lord. Honour and revere Him in all things as is due to His Holy nature.

## A Note on Fools

When the Bible refers to someone as a “fool” it is not just engaging in name-calling. Instead, the terms that are translated to English as “fool” describe a certain type of person. As you read through Proverbs you'll recognize these descriptions of types of people who display foolish behaviour or attitudes. Here are three types found in Proverbs:

- **Kēsîl** - is the dull or thick-headed person who has a tendency to make wrong decisions because he will not listen to other people. Instead, he loves to hear himself talk (Prov. 18:2, 6–7) and is not able to deal with the present (Prov. 17:24).
- **Ēwîl** - stresses moral deficiency, a lack of self-control as displayed in words or temper (Prov. 12:16). This fool thinks he has all the answers (Prov. 12:15).
- **Nabal** - is a disgraceful person who does not have respect for anything or anyone (Prov. 17:7, 21; 30:22), much like the person named Nabal (1 Sam. 25:17).<sup>7</sup>

The goal of Proverbs is to help keep young people specifically and everyone in general from developing into fools by choosing the way of wisdom.

## THE WAY OF WISDOM

The first nine chapters of Proverbs lay out for the reader the way of wisdom by creatively using the scenario of a father teaching his son in a series of lectures. Wisdom is also personified as a virtuous woman - Lady Wisdom who exhorts the simple to follow her ways to find blessing.

---

<sup>5</sup> Richard P. Belcher Jr, Finding Favour in the Sight of God, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Corley, Steve Lemke, and Grant Lovejoy, Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 285.

<sup>7</sup> Richard P. Belcher Jr, Finding Favour in the Sight of God, 21–22.

There is also the opposite character of Lady Folly - who mirrors Lady Wisdom by calling out to the simple to follow her, but her path leads to destruction. These fatherly lectures and the imaginative allegory of Lady Wisdom and Folly are the focus of the first nine chapters.

**At the end of chapter 9, it calls for a choice to be made. Will you follow the way of wisdom or the way of folly?** This is what should frame the rest of Proverbs as you read it. It is laying out for you the two paths and bringing you to decide which one you will follow as you live life.

## Following Wisdom is Following God

There is more to Proverbs than just sage advice for a good life though. It's not just like the advice you'd get from a social media influencer or pop-culture guru. Wisdom is presented in a way that parallels what the OT says about Yahweh:

- Wisdom is presented in ways that parallel what is said about God in other parts of the OT. Wisdom proclaims, 'I will pour out my spirit to you' (Prov. 1:23), and God declares, 'I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring' (Isa. 44:3; see also Joel 2:28).
- Wisdom stretches out her hand to those who will not listen, just as God does in Isaiah 65:2: 'I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people'.
- Wisdom laughs at the calamity of the fool who rejects her just as God laughs at those who seek to throw off his authority (Ps. 2:4).
- If fools continue to reject Wisdom, there will come a time when they will seek her but not be able to find her (Prov. 1:28). As part of the judgment against his people God promises a time when they will seek him but not be able to find him (Hos. 5:6–7).<sup>8</sup>

Thus, in an immensely practical way, following the way of wisdom is to follow God.

### Rival Gods

Another key to understanding Wisdom in Proverbs 9 is that the location of her house is on "the highest point of the city" (v.3). This is a detail that would have been readily understood by ancient readers and is overlooked by us. In the Ancient Near East, only one person had the right to dwell at the highest point of a city - its god. This is why the temple was on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. However, Lady Folly also has her house at "the highest point of the city" (v.14). She represents a false and competing god. **Thus, the reader is confronted with rival 'gods' calling for him to follow them, dine with them, share intimacy and worship them.**

## INTERPRETIVE TOOLS

Here are four tools to help interpret Proverbs correctly:

---

<sup>8</sup> Richard P. Belcher Jr, Finding Favour in the Sight of God, 30.



## I. Literary Context

**There are some cases where a commentary is helpful to see all that the writer is doing in the literary context of the original language.** For example, the passage in Proverbs 31:10-31 describing the wife of noble character is actually an alphabetical acrostic with each line starting with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In this way, it forms a complete “A to Z” of wifely virtues.

The single sentence Proverbs can often seem to lack context and be disconnected. But they are meant to collectively instruct us in following the way of wisdom. However, there are other challenges that we must understand the literary context to address properly. For example, Proverbs 22:6,

Train up a child in the way he should go,  
Even when he is old he will not depart from it.

The phrase in Hebrew translated “in the way he should go” could also be translated “according to his way”. So which is it? Are we to train up children according to their own way if they are selfish then to just let them have at it and become increasingly selfish? Or is it perhaps to train them up according to the way God has made them, factoring in their unique personalities and learning style? Why do most translations not translate it as “in his own way” and instead as “in the way he *SHOULD* go? Is this a bad translation?

No. The support for the traditional view is that the word for train (ḥānāk) has the sense of starting a young person off with a strong commitment to a certain religious and moral direction to counteract the foolish way. It requires discipline and work to encourage the child in this way and the consequence, generally, of doing this is that the youth will not depart from this initial training because it will be deep-rooted and have built character in him/her. **This is the sense we get when we consider all of Proverbs’ teaching on raising children. This is what we mean by considering the Literary Context.**

However, this is not an absolute promise - which leads to our next point.

## II. Principles NOT Promises

One way to misread Proverbs is to view them as absolute promises that work in a mechanical way. This is the error of the health and wealth ‘gospel’. For example:

No ill befalls the righteous,  
but the wicked are filled with trouble.  
(Proverbs 12:21)

The blessing of the Lord makes rich,  
and he adds no sorrow with it.  
(Proverbs 10:22)

If we were to read these Proverbs as if they were absolute promises we'd be naming and claiming our fancy jets and million-dollar mansions. If you are blessed then you are righteous and if something bad happens to you, it must be because you did something wrong. This was the view of Job's miserable friends (which we will explore in our next section), but this is the wrong way to read the Proverbs. As Osborn comments,

"Most important, we dare not read more into the proverbial statement than is there. By their very nature they are generalized statements, intended to give advice rather than to establish rigid codes by which God works."<sup>9</sup>

Instead, Proverbs should be understood as statements that are generally true because they help bring us in line with the way God has ordered His creation. **They are principles to live by that will, generally speaking, lead to a life that is blessed by God.** However, they are not absolute because we live in a fallen world and there are many complexities to life. Even though they do not guarantee a smooth and carefree life, they are the "better" path to take in seeking to follow God.

The Proverbs expound how the life of the wise person who fears God should live. It deals with **probabilities not promises** - that is, if you follow the Proverbs, probably your life will go well, but nothing is guaranteed.

**Proverbs focuses on the general rule NOT the exceptions.** The exceptions are actually picked up in the other two wisdom books - Job and Ecclesiastes. Life is too complex for simplistic formulas which is why we need all the wisdom books together to get the big picture.

Another way to think of them is that they are "dependently true now" but will be "ultimately true then" when God consummates His Kingdom on earth.

### III. Situational Application

Let's take a look at Proverbs 26:4-5. It says,

Answer not a fool according to his folly,  
lest you be like him yourself.  
Answer a fool according to his folly,  
lest he be wise in his own eyes.

So are we supposed to answer a fool or not? Which is it?

---

<sup>9</sup> Grant R. Osborne, The Hermeneutical Spiral, 247.

Well, it depends. The second half of the proverbs help clarify. Verse 4 says not to answer him “lest you be like him”. There are some situations where if you were to stoop down to the level of a fool, he’d just beat you with experience and you’d end up looking stupid. We should not take up the same attitudes or tactics as a fool because we’d become foolish ourselves. Verse 5 says that you should answer him because if you don’t, he’ll think himself wise. There are some situations where it would be fruitful to help show a fool the folly of his position by hypothetically taking on his position and showing the absurdity of it. This is often the task of apologetics. We hypothetically take the assumptions of another worldview and show how it collapses when you take it to its logical conclusion.

So, while it may be dangerous to respond to a fool in his own way because you’ll end up becoming foolish in doing so, it is also the duty of the wise to discern when we must show the fool the folly of his/her position.

**Proverbs instruct us towards wisdom and also encourages us to use wisdom in applying them to our lives.**

## **A Strategy for Reading Proverbs | Gleaning**

One of the best ways to approach the sections in Proverbs that are sentence sayings is to start collecting them together and arranging them by the topic they address to build a more full picture of the wisdom on it. You can do this as you read by keeping a journal. This is like the analogy of putting together the 1000 piece puzzle. Think of this as picking up the puzzle pieces along the way, and then figuring out how they fit together to form the big picture.

A handy strategy is to read through a chapter of Proverbs every day in the months that have 31 days because Proverbs has 31 chapters. My dad used to make this a regular practice for us as kids and it helped me massively to ingest the wisdom of Proverbs through repetition.

---

## **Discussion Groups #1 | Proverbs 26**

- Read Proverbs 26 together
  - Pick out one key theme in the chapter that stands out to you
  - What wisdom do you glean from Proverbs 26 on this theme?
-

## 2. JOB | Wisdom for Struggling with Suffering

If Proverbs sought to give us wisdom for living wisely in the world so that we would enjoy a life blessed by God, **Job serves as the counterbalance to our impulse to interpret the Proverbs as absolute promises.**

Job tells the story of a righteous and blameless man who very much embodies the way of wisdom and righteousness in Proverbs. However, despite his piety, calamity befalls Job's life. In one fell swoop, his wealth and children are taken from him and even his wife seems to desert him. The rest of the book's story wrestles with making sense of it all.

“Job wrestles with the disorder of suffering and its relationship to piety. The friends of Job operate with a mechanical view of divine retribution so that if Job is suffering he must have sinned. This is a distortion of the view of Proverbs but it causes Job to wrestle with God's justice and how he should respond to suffering even though he is innocent. The mystery and sovereignty of God is emphasized in God's response to Job, showing that people understand little about God's ways in the world concerning individual suffering and that the proper response is to fear Yahweh.”<sup>10</sup>

### An Outline of Job

1. Prologue (Chapters 1–2)
2. Job's lament (Chapter 3)
3. The cycle of speeches - Job's friends and his protests (Chapters 4–27)
4. A poem on man's search for wisdom (Chapter 28)
5. Job's last defence (Chapters 29–31)
6. Elihu's speeches (Chapters 32–37)
7. God's speeches and Job's responses (Chapters 38–42:6)
8. Epilogue (Chapters 42:7–17)

### Genre of Job

The prologue and epilogue are written as prose, whereas the whole rest of the book of Job is actually poetry. So, clearly, Job is not a traditional narrative. The speeches are not meant to be word-for-word dictation of what the characters said. It's not like people just burst out in spontaneous poetry and song when they're mourning - unless you're living in a Bollywood movie.

This is really important to remember because we interpret poetry differently to prose.

---

<sup>10</sup> Richard P. Belcher Jr, Finding Favour in the Sight of God, 14.

“Job is best understood as a debate about how to respond to suffering that leads to the question concerning where wisdom is to be found.”<sup>11</sup>

## KEYS TO INTERPRETING JOB

As with all books of the Bible, there is an intentional structure to the book of Job and it is really important to recognize that in order to rightly interpret it.

### The Prologue | The Heavenly Courtroom

The prose sections of the prologue and epilogue form a framework in which we are to understand what happens in the poetic dialogues between Job and his friends.

The prologue takes the reader behind the scenes into the chamber of God’s Divine council. **Nowhere do we read that Job or his friends are told of this Divine Council that sets up the situation. So this is information that is meant to guide us as readers on how we interpret what comes next in the narrative.** There, we see the scene that starts things into motion where the “Satan” comes into God’s presence from roaming around the earth. The Hebrew treats the word “Satan” here not as a name but as a common noun meaning “the accuser”. This sets up the Heavenly courtroom scene as the term “satan” or “adversary” is also the term for the prosecutor.

God initiates by asking the Accuser if he has considered his servant Job - holding him up as an example of true piety. It sets up the question: is there anything such as someone who worships God from pure motivation? **Does God’s finest servant, Job, serve God for conscience or convenience?** If the prosecution, the accuser, can prove God’s finest servant to be a hypocrite, then no one’s sincerity will be credible.

In a series of exchanges, the Accuser basically says that Job only worships God because God has blessed him and requests permission to strike at Job’s blessings of wealth, children and health. Job loses all his wealth, all his children are killed in a tragic disaster and he is struck with a painful illness - then his own wife turns on him and tells him to curse God and die. God allows this and in each of the afflictions that the Accuser brings on Job, Job responds in integrity and does not curse God. **Job is on trial and so far has been vindicated in his integrity.**

H. H. Rowley comments,

“We may pause to note that the cause of Job’s suffering was more than the Satan’s insinuation against him. He was suffering to vindicate more than himself. He was vindicating God’s trust in him. He was not so much abandoned by God as supremely honoured by God.”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Richard P. Belcher Jr, *Finding Favour in the Sight of God*, 77.

<sup>12</sup> H. H. Rowley, “The Book of Job and its Meaning”, in *From Moses to Qumran* (Lutterworth, 1963), 178.

This prologue puts the question to rest upfront that Job is NOT suffering because of any guilt or sin or fault in his faith. **Far from guilt, it is actually Job's innocence that exposed him to the whole ordeal as God makes clear by repeating twice (Job 1:8 & 2:3).**

Next, in chapter 3 Job laments his birth because of his suffering. This is the honest cry of one who is suffering immensely, and Job is a place where the Bible does not flinch from dealing squarely with this reality. This sets up the challenge that the book will wrestle with and the frame for how we read the rest of Job as his friends make rash accusations against Job that his suffering is due to his sin. Job is innocent, yet they try to convince him otherwise and become miserable comforters to him.

## **JOB'S MISERABLE COMFORTERS | Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar**

Job's friends at first come alongside him and mourn in silence. However, this is probably the best thing they do for their friend in the whole book. For the rest of the book, they accuse Job of hidden sin that has caused his calamity. They represent people who take a mechanical view of God's operations in the world. If we do good, God will bless us - tit for tat - in a transactional way. **Their view of God's justice is ultimately mechanical and simplistic.**

However, not all that they say is wrong. The New Testament actually treats some of the words of Eliphaz as Scripture (e.g. Job 5:13 & 1 Cor. 3:19; Job 5:17 & Heb. 12:5). So clearly it isn't as simplistic as that. Each of his friends is a firm believer in the One True God who is all-powerful and wholly just, who is ready to restore the penitent and bless the teachable. **It is their belief in this God that causes them to struggle with Job's suffering - it challenges their preconceived notions of God.**

## **Challenging a Small View of God**

A close look at the dialogue of the friends reveals that their basic error is that they overestimate their grasp of truth, misapply the truth they know, and close their minds to any facts that contradict what they assume. The friends know many truths of Scripture and arrogantly think they have it all figured out which leads them to misjudge Job. **The book shows how small a fragment of any situation we actually perceive and how much we can ignore or distort through our presuppositions.** It is thus unwise to extrapolate from our elementary grasp of truth to every situation. The book reinforces this by showing that Job's friends "paint idealized pictures of a world of prosperous saints and destitute sinners, brushing aside all contrary examples."<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Derek Kidner, The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, 61.

## The Conflict | Who is wise?

Each of the cycles of dialogue switches between one of Job's friend's accusations then Job's response in defence in the order of Eliphaz, Job, Bildad, Job, then Zophar and Job. This cycle happens three times. **Each time cycle, the friends' speeches get shorter and shorter reflecting the fact that they are running out of arguments.** Their arguments don't really seem to advance any other point other than a mechanistic view of retribution: God blesses the righteous and curses the wicked, therefore, Job must be a sinner in need of repentance.

Job counters the 'wisdom' of his friends in 9:21-24 where he boldly states that God "destroys both the blameless and the wicked." Job repeatedly wishes that he could have an audience with God - then he could set things straight and plead his case. Then he would question God as to why he allows an innocent to suffer. In this contest between Job and his friends, the question that dominates the whole book: **Who is really wise in all of this?** Is it Bildad, Zophar, Eliphaz, Job?

**Job anticipates the answer to this question in the poem on divine wisdom in chapter 28 where he ascribes all wisdom to God.**

## Elihu | The Recent Seminary Grad

Elihu is a brash young man who thinks he has all the answers. In a lot of ways, he's like a recent proud seminary graduate who's got a chip on his shoulders and something to prove. This is seen in how long-winded his monologue is! He claims to have new insight that the other three friends have missed. But despite this claim and many words, he really doesn't add anything new but just comes back up with the same theology of mechanical retribution.

**After Elihu's monologue, it is clear that human wisdom has run out. It is time for God to take the stage.**

## GOD'S RESPONSE | A Whirlwind of Truth

Perhaps significant is that when God finally does speak and replies to Job's three friends, he doesn't even bother to reply to Elihu. Perhaps this ignoring of the brash young man puts him in his place.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the book, Job had hoped for a divine interview to learn why he was suffering. However, to our surprise, God doesn't seem to directly answer that question. Instead, He rebukes Job for casting doubt on His Divine reputation:

---

<sup>14</sup> Tremper Longman & Raymond Dillard, An Introduction to the Old Testament, 230

“Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me and justify yourself?” (Job 40:8)

Out of the whirlwind, God tells Job:

“Who is this that darkens counsel  
By words without knowledge?  
“Now gird up your loins like a man,  
And I will ask you, and you instruct Me!  
(Job 38:2-3)

Instead of directly answering Job, God responds with a barrage of penetrating questions that definitively show that God alone is wise. He shows Job how complex the world is and all the intricate details that go into running it. God’s questions demonstrate his full knowledge and control of the universe that He created in contrast to Job’s ignorance and limited knowledge.

The point is not that God is a Divine bully in the sky. Rather, it is that we as humans have such a limited view of all the complexities of the workings of an infinitely powerful, wise and sovereign God who is at any moment doing billions and trillions of things at once in the Universe to accomplish His good purposes. Our perspective is just limited to our short lives and incomplete perspective of things and thus unable to make a proper judgment on God’s operation of the world and all of history. **It is improper of us to try to judge the Judge of all the Universe on how He runs the cosmos.** I can’t even multitask brushing my teeth and walking downstairs sometimes - far less understanding everything about how God runs the Universe!

As Grant R. Osborne notes, “The many variables and paradoxes faced in life forced the wise person to recognize his limitations and depend on God as the true source of wisdom.”<sup>15</sup>

## Epilogue | Vindication

**Job’s response is to repent of his quickness to presume to know better than God.**

However, this does not make his original assertion of innocence void. He only repents of speaking wrongly about God.

The story ends with God vindicating Job in front of his friends and restoring double to Job all that he had lost.

“Job is a wisdom debate about how to respond to suffering. Job’s initial response is patient submission. Job’s wife responds with panicked pity. The friends’ initial response is silent sympathy. Job’s response in chapter 3 can be called persevering protest. The friends will then respond by accusing Job of sin as the reason for his suffering.”<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Rev. and expanded, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 244.

<sup>16</sup> Richard P. Belcher Jr, *Finding Favour in the Sight of God*, 86.



In Job, we see the emotional rollercoaster of an honest struggle with suffering by a pious and righteous man and many find comfort in his candour and frankness. **His responses sway between hopeful optimism and back to deep despair - something common for those experiencing intense suffering. Yet in the midst of honest struggle, Job still shows strong affirmations of faith, “Though he slay me, I will hope in him.” (13:15)** And so, Job stands as an instructive testimony through the ages for all of us and thus God continues to use his suffering for a good purpose. In all this, Job was not forgotten by His God - God always saw and was with Job. This is the infinite wisdom of God.

The point of the book is not necessarily to exhaustively explain all of the suffering or the reasons why God might allow every instance of suffering, but rather to move us to trust God.

## VIDEO: The Book of Job

---

### Discussion Groups #2 | Job 40

- Read Job 40
  - What do you learn from the exchange between God and Job? What is one thing that stands out above the rest?
- 

## 3. ECCLESIASTES | Wisdom in the Balance

Ecclesiastes is the last of the three major wisdom books. If Proverbs deals with how to live wisely in God's world, and Job deals with the fact that even if we do live wisely it doesn't guarantee a pain-free life, then Ecclesiastes serves as another balance to a well-rounded biblical view of wisdom. In it, there are two distinct voices: the narrator who frames the story in the opening and closing sections of the book, and a character named “Qohelet” in Hebrew.

“Qohelet wrestles with the disorder in the world concerning the breakdown of the deed–consequence relationship as he examines labour, wisdom and God's justice in a world that does not make sense. The epilogue of the book clearly points to the solution of the proper response: fear God and keep his commandments.”<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Richard P. Belcher Jr, Finding Favour in the Sight of God: A Theology of Wisdom Literature, ed. D. A. Carson, vol. 46, New Studies in Biblical Theology (London; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos; IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2018), 14.

Ecclesiastes shows us the complexities of life and how time, death and chance prevent us from being able to fully understand or master it.

## **OPTIONAL VIDEO: The Book of Ecclesiastes**

---

## **WISDOM AND CHRIST**

All three of these wisdom books are necessary for us to gain a balanced view of wisdom from the Bible. But there is one more connection we have to recognize. All of Scripture points to Christ, and that includes the wisdom literature as well.

### **The Cross and Job**

How do we know God's love and good character?

For us today, this is best seen in the Cross of Jesus Christ. The only true example of a truly righteous and innocent man suffering which brought about the greatest good in the world. However, that was no ordinary man - Jesus was the God-Man. God in the flesh. If there ever was an example of an egregious injustice - it is the crucifixion of Christ - the only totally sinless and fully righteous man. Yet, as Peter says, this was according to "the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23) to bring about His sovereign plan of salvation by grace to sinners who cannot save themselves. So, if we know anything about God and our suffering, suffering cannot mean that He does not care or cannot have a good purpose for all things. The Cross of Christ guarantees this.

In the book, Job expresses his need for an arbiter to bring him together with God (9:33). He feels trapped and does not know how to bring his case before God so that he can be acquitted. This desire for an arbiter between Job and God is exactly what Jesus is for us also. "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time." (1 Timothy 2:5-6) Indeed, we can say with even more certainty than Job did:

"For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth.  
And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God."  
(Job 18:25-26)

### **Jesus Christ - Wisdom Embodied**

There are also connections between the character of Wisdom and Christ:

- Both Wisdom and Christ are presented as instruments of creation (Prov. 3:19, 'by wisdom'; John 1:3, 'through him'; and Col. 1:16, 'by him' and 'through him'). When Paul says that "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (Col. 1:15), he is using the language of Proverbs 8.
- Both Wisdom and Christ are street preachers proclaiming their message in public places, calling people to follow them, and warning of the dangers if people reject their message.
- Both Wisdom and Christ are like banquet hostesses sending forth messengers, inviting people to a banquet of substantial food, experiencing opposition from sinners and promising life to those who come to the banquet.
- Both Wisdom and Christ existed with God before all things, descended from heaven, offered blessings in the symbols of food and drink, sent out invitations for people to join them and were rejected by the masses. But Christ is greater than Wisdom because he is specifically identified as the Son (John 1:18), equal with God his Father (John 10:30), the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), the one who will reconcile all things to himself (Col. 1:20).<sup>18</sup>

This is simply to point out that as we read our Bibles, we must read it Christologically. This does not mean that we try to find Jesus in every verse, but rather recognize that the point of all of Scripture is to point us to Christ. All of Scripture points us to Jesus Christ as the center of our worship and salvation - including wisdom itself. Because in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3). Jesus Christ embodies the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:30). When he was on earth, his predominant form of teaching was a form of wisdom called the parable, which in Hebrew is *masal* also translated as "proverb".

The Wisdom who beckons us is none other than Jesus Christ. Will you hear his voice?

---

<sup>18</sup> Richard P. Belcher Jr, Finding Favour in the Sight of God, 38.