

SKILLFUL LIVING

AN INTRODUCTION TO PROVERBS

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There is nothing like a good old fashioned road trip. Growing up, my parents worked hard to regularly make time for us to get out camping. Dad would get the time off work, load all us kids into the minivan, hook up the tent trailer and away we went! These trips would often include a nice long road trip. I have countless memories of hours spent in the van, listening to music, reading, playing the alphabet game, slug bug, roadside bingo, eating junk food, and ALWAYS peacefully interacting with my siblings. Now, being a parent myself, and having survived a few road trips as a family, I know just how much time and energy goes into planning, preparing and going on a long road trip.

Life is often illustrated in terms of being a *journey*. Constant changes and challenges to overcome as we walk the *path* of life, with decisions at every *crossroad*. Countless songs and poems pick up this same imagery. As we begin our series in the Proverbs, “Skillful Living”, we will see how the authors of these Proverbs (mostly Solomon), give clear and concise instruction in Skillful Living. These instructions are based on such clear and simple principles, that I believe we will find them just as helpful in our time as they were in the time of Solomon over 3000 years ago. Over the next number of weeks, let us sit at the feet of Solomon and company, and learn the principles of Skillful Living. For this week, let us start by thinking about the supplies that we will need for our trip to be most successful.

WHAT IS WISDOM LITERATURE?

Before we embark on this rich study of the book of Proverbs, a couple notes on it's context will be helpful. Proverbs is part of a group of writings, or “genre”, called “Wisdom Literature”. Other scriptural books in this genre are Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. One very important key to rightly interpreting Proverbs, is understanding that these short sayings are “general principles” not “promises”. I personally have counseled with parents who have taken as a promise, the well known Proverb 22:6, “Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old he will not depart from it”. Their child had walked away from the faith and the church, and the parents had a deep sense of guilt that their child's rejection was because they hadn't trained their child well enough. On the other hand, this Proverb, taken as a promise, has also been used to bring a false sense of comfort to those whose children had walked away from the faith. Following the logic, that since they had raised their child in the “way he should go”, then certainly he would return to the faith. Afterall, isn't that what God's word says? Sadly, when we don't understand how to rightly interpret God's Word, we can end up bringing harm rather than help. We will look at that particular proverb at a later time, but let it suffice to illustrate for us today the importance of remembering that proverbs aren't promises, rather they are principles to help us live skillfully. Literature in the “Wisdom” genre, will use many images, similes and metaphors to represent the *regular and observable patterns of human behavior in a memorable way*, in order that we might learn the principles of Skillful Living. As we go along, we will pick up some new interpretive tools, and sharpen the ones we have. But first, a quick look at Proverbs primary author; King Solomon.

WHO WAS SOLOMON?

King Solomon was the son of David and Bathsheba. You can read about his life in 1 Kings 1-11. He was an unusual selection for King seeing as he was not the oldest of David's sons. Early on in his reign he sought after God diligently, and God rewarded him by giving him the opportunity to ask for whatever he would want. Solomon humbly recognized his need for wisdom in order to rule his kingdom, so that was his request. In response to this humble request, God not only granted him wisdom, but also wealth, beyond measure. (1 Kings 10:23) "Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom". He was wise and his kingdom was established with the foundation of these wise principles. He was a writer, a poet, and a builder, accomplishing the building of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. However, later in his life, Solomon's heart was led astray toward other gods. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines, many of them from other nations who worshipped other gods, and they slowly but surely chiseled away at Solomon's strict monotheism, resulting in his practicing of idolatry and the corresponding punishment of God. See 1 Kings 11:9-11. Though Solomon strayed from the LORD later in his life, his writings are a powerful testimony to the gift of wisdom God had graced him with, as well as the lived wisdom he acquired through ruling the kingdom of Israel. We would be wise to "listen" to his wisdom both as to how *to* live, as well as how *not to* live.

WHAT IS THE POINT OF PROVERBS?

Simply put, the Proverbs are written so that the readers may learn to "Live Skillfully". The way to learn this is through the acquisition of "Wisdom". The term "Wisdom" or in Hebrew "Hokma" encompasses a number of different virtues put into action. A Skilled Life results, when all the correct ingredients are used and the instructions are followed. The words "wisdom" and "wise" are used at least 125 times through Proverbs, and wisdom is even personified in numerous places to help drive home the importance of wisdom in our lives.

The LORD would use the Proverbs to help us navigate the varied situations that we find ourselves face to face with in our daily lives. As we study this book, we will encounter principles to help us with: our children, parents, jobs, spouse, time management, speech, attitude, money, neighbors, etc. There is no shortage of instruction for our lives in this wonderful book, and for those of us who humbly approach it ready to be instructed, we will find wonderful outcomes in our lives and relationships. God is the creator, master and giver of wisdom, (Job 28:12-28, Proverbs 8:22-31) and those who would "Live Skillfully" need to recognize that truth as a first priority, as seen in the key verses to the entire book.

Proverbs 1:7

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction. "

Proverbs 9:10

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight."

