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Proverbs Introduction (Part 1)



Proverbs - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg discusses the themes and structure of the book of Proverbs in the Bible. He notes that the book does not follow a specific train of thought, but rather is a collection of sayings, reminiscent of "Poor Richard's Almanac." Gregg explores the issue of divine guidance and the role of scripture, prophets, and wisdom. He discusses the importance of discipline and instruction in upbringing and draws on examples from various biblical stories to illustrate the themes of wisdom and the fear of the Lord.

Transcript

Proverbs is a kind of book that doesn't really follow one theme or train of thought all the way through, but it's a collection of sayings that perhaps are reminiscent of something like Poor Richard's Almanac or something like that. The Hebrews really had an appreciation for what they called wisdom sayings, and some of the books of the Bible are devoted entirely to what we call wisdom. Now, we know what wisdom means, at least we think we do, at least we have the word in our language.

We speak about somebody being wise or having wisdom, though the word wisdom has almost a technical meaning when applied to wisdom literature of the Hebrews. Proverbs is an excellent example of what's called wisdom literature, but there are other examples. The book of Job, which we actually covered in our last school last year, is actually considered wisdom literature.

Although it's a story, at least part of it is a story, the first two chapters and the last chapter provide sort of a story framework. The approximately 40 chapters in the middle are all simply discussions about deep philosophical questions, primarily about the meaning of suffering and how a man's righteousness or unrighteousness may have something to do with his earthly fortunes. So, really most of the book of Job is what is called wisdom literature and is considered to be part of that genre.

Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon even are considered wisdom literature. There are other books that are not in our Bible, like Ecclesiasticus and some others that are in the Apocrypha, that are also examples of this kind of literature. There are a number of

wise men and sages that are mentioned in the Bible who didn't write any parts of the Bible, but we know of them because the Bible mentions them.

We know that wise men or wisdom was a very much valued aspect of what people considered to be God's way of communicating and guiding his people's lives. When it comes to the issue of divine guidance, depending on your, say, denominational orientation, you might, like me growing up as a Baptist, you might think divine guidance is just a matter of read the Bible and follow what the Bible says and without anything much more personal or much more timely than that expected. If you're more Pentecostal or charismatic, you might have the idea that you should be getting a word from God, like a revelation from God, a prophecy from God about almost every decision of significance that you make.

Most Christians fall into one of those two categories. They either say, well, I should be hearing from God, I need to get a word from God about this or that, or they deny all of that kind of stuff and they say, no, we just go by the Bible, just follow the Bible. In many cases, I find that people fall into one of those extremes and don't know about the middle part, which is what the Hebrews know a great deal about, and that is that God guides you through wisdom, almost what we might call common sense.

It sounds very unspiritual, but we have to remember that God created humans unique in the animal world in that he gave us rational minds. Now, other animals act as if they're rational at times. Solomon, for example, makes reference to the wisdom that ants demonstrate in their behavior communally.

There is an appearance of wisdom in other animals, but of course it's all instinctive. They don't figure things out. Animals might seem creative when you look at how a beaver builds a dam or a spider builds a web, marvels of engineering, really.

I couldn't do as well with my human brain, but they don't have human brains. In fact, they don't even have hardly any brains at all, except that are centered for the nervous system. They don't really think.

A spider is born knowing how to make a web. It doesn't figure it out. A beaver is born knowing how to build a dam.

Birds know how to build nests. Ants and bees in their colonies, they're born knowing how to be organized. They didn't figure this out.

They're not wise. They're not rational. When God made all the animals, after he'd finished doing that, he said, I want to make something a lot more like myself.

He made man in his own image and woman and he gave them rational powers so that they could actually have wisdom. They could actually think things through. We should not discount that as a means of knowing the will of God.

It's not the only way. I'm much happier if I have to make a decision, if there's an actual text of Scripture that tells me what to do. As far as I'm concerned, if there's a word from the Lord, that trumps everything.

I don't even mind if God seems to speak to me in a still, small voice or gives me some clear guidance in that kind of a way or even through a prophetic utterance that someone may give. I don't scorn those things at all. But I have to say that most of the decisions I make are not really informed by prophetic words that people bring me.

Now, believe me, I've had a lot of people bring me prophetic words and say, God has a word for you, this is it. And I'd say nine out of ten times I have my doubts whether it's really from the Lord or not. But not always.

There are times when God has definitely given me wisdom and insight about a decision or some kind of encouragement through what appeared to be a prophetic word that someone gave me. I don't discount that. And I certainly would say that most of the... well, an awful lot of the decisions I've made have been informed from the Bible itself.

But I think on a day-to-day basis, when Christians have to decide what should I do? What should I eat? What kind of car should I buy? Should I go to school or not? I mean, there's decisions like that. You're not going to get a Bible verse that answers that question for you. And you might not get a prophetic word about it.

And I don't think it would be wise to wait for one. I remember in a Christian house that I knew a friend who lived in a Christian house who said that there was a man there, and this was true, this was not a joke, that he would, in the morning, he would not have breakfast until he felt like he had a word from the Lord about which cereal to eat. And I have met more than one person who had this kind of spirituality that they felt that they really can't do anything until they get a prophetic word to their spirit from God.

And I don't really think that's what God has intended. I think that's being more spiritual than the apostles. And what the Bible indicates is that there's another category.

There's not only the prophetic word and the scriptures. There's also this thing that God has given called wisdom. And most of the time when we make decisions about ordinary things, just wisdom is what God intends for us to use.

And we should not think of that as unspiritual because it's the special gift to humanity that God himself possesses and he has not given to the other parts of creation but to us. And that's intended to be used. That's why I really think it's a terrible thing to see people wasting their brains, especially now that we have so many ways to absorb our attention in things that are mindless things, whether it's just entertaining things, whether it's just surfing the internet without any particular purpose, just vegetating.

I think the devil is very happy to see people lose the use of their brains. And I think that

a lot of Christians have almost gotten to a place where they think it's kind of unspiritual to use their brains. They need to be led by the spirit more directly or more mysteriously.

I'm all for that. If the Holy Spirit leads you mysteriously, if it's really the Holy Spirit, go for that. I believe in that.

But the Hebrews knew that there were three ways they could get the mind of God. One of them was through the law. In Israel, the priests were the custodians of the law.

People didn't have Bibles at home. They didn't have printing presses. They couldn't go out and buy a Bible.

Each copy of the scripture had to be handwritten. It took a long time and it was very expensive. So usually the only Bibles around were in the hands of the priests.

And it says in Leviticus 10 that the priests should teach the people the law. Malachi 2 also tells us that the priests were supposed to seek the law of the Lord from the mouth of the priests because they didn't have access to it at home in writing. But the law of the Lord could be consulted if anyone wondered what to do.

In fact, in the book of Judges, that's apparently how Israel was governed. When people had disputes, they brought them to the judge, if there happened to be one at that time. Sometimes there were, sometimes there weren't.

And the judge would judge them out of the law of God. Moses did that in his lifetime too. And you remember he appointed subordinates under the counsel of his father-in-law Jethro to have different levels of judges who would tell people out of the law of God what the right thing to do is.

That's certainly one way the Hebrews knew what God wanted them to do. If it's in the law, all questions are gone. We know it settles all disputes.

But of course many things are not written in the law. Not everything is. And they knew there were also the prophets.

They had the law and they had the prophets. And in many periods of Israel's history, they had living prophets. And these were generally men who spoke to the rulers, although they would sometimes speak to people too.

But the rulers of Israel had to rule according to God's mind. And so they had court prophets. Unfortunately, in some periods of Israel's apostasy, they had false prophets on the king's court.

Prophets of Baal and even fake prophets of Jehovah. But in general, they knew that they had to have prophets to instruct the king because there would be times when the law wouldn't give specific instruction. He means no shy go to war at Ramoth Gilead and fight

the Syrians.

Well, it's calling the prophets. They can tell us. And so Israel knew they could get guidance from the law or from the prophets.

But they also had the wise men. And some of the wise men were so reputed for wisdom that although they were not considered to be inspired, it could be said of them as with Ahithophel, David's counselor. It was said that people used to say that to inquire of Ahithophel was like to inquire of the Oracle of God.

Now, Oracle of God means an inspired prophet. But Ahithophel was not inspired. He was not a prophet.

He was just a really smart guy. And people learned to trust his counsel. And they said, you hear from Ahithophel, it's like hearing from God.

And although not everyone had the same reputation Ahithophel had, there were many wise men and every king had in his court counselors who were reputed for wisdom. And the Jews knew that God could give guidance through the law, which tells to be like the written scripture, through the prophets, which tells to be like the spirit of prophecy, maybe speaking to your heart or speaking through somebody prophetically to you or some other way, some more direct contemporary kind of a revelation from God, but also through wisdom. And so out of this conviction arose a whole genre of literature in Israel called wisdom literature.

And it has its own features. And I want to give you an introduction to wisdom literature before we go into Proverbs per se, although we'll be using illustrations from the book of Proverbs and other wisdom literature to make our points. In your notes, I want to run through these points here.

We can see early on, even before we come to the wisdom literature itself, as you're reading through the historical books, we encounter evidence that there were people in Israel that were known to be wise and known to be people you would consult. In 2 Samuel chapter 14, Joab wanted to represent Absalom's interest before the king David. But David was angry at Absalom and wouldn't see him.

And so Joab employed a woman who was said to be a wise woman from a town called Tekoa. And she went in and she appealed to David in a certain manner. We don't have time to go into right now.

But Joab, when he wanted to use this particular approach to convincing David, he went and sought someone who was known as a wise woman. It wasn't just wise men, but wise women were known in Israel. And when someone's called wise, it wasn't just like you might say about somebody, you know, they're a pretty wise person.

This was someone who was known to be someone you'd go to for counsel. Not counseling. When we talk about counsel, we have to realize we're talking about advice.

We're not talking about therapy, you know. We sometimes use the word counsel or counseling meaning more something like therapy. But they go to certain individuals for counsel.

They had a reputation. In fact, there's a city in Israel called Abel. It's mentioned in 2 Samuel 20 and verse 18.

It says, in the old days, people used to say, we'll go and inquire at Abel. The whole city was known for being full of wise people or at least had a number of significant wise people. So it was like a counseling center.

If you needed some advice, you go to this town and there's going to be someone there who can give you wise counsel. This is something that we don't know how this phenomenon arose in Israel where they recognized certain individuals and even locations as centers for wisdom. But we see them early on in the Bible.

When we talk about the wisdom of Solomon, and it's talking about his wisdom and his wealth and his glory of his kingdom in 1 Kings chapter 4, it mentions in 1 Kings 4.31, it says, Solomon was wiser than Ethan the Ezraite and then Haman and Chalco and Darda. Now, we don't know who any of these guys are, except I think Ethan the Ezraite might have written a few of our psalms. I think there are a couple of psalms with his name on them.

But we don't know who he was, except that he must have been wise. He's one of the reference for Solomon. Solomon was wiser than Ethan the Ezraite and then Haman and Chalco and Darda.

These men are unknown to us, except that they were smart enough to be used as sort of the bar that Solomon exceeded. If you want to raise the bar high for wisdom, these are kind of the standard, these guys up here. We don't know who they were, whether they were attached to the government or whether they were just men that were freelance advisors.

We don't know. But we can see that there were men, even men that aren't famous to us, we don't know who they are, but they were famous in Israel for their wisdom. There are samples outside of our wisdom literature of some of the witticisms that were current in Israel.

I'll give you a few samples in your notes. 1 Samuel 24, this is when David is being pursued by Saul and he has refused to kill Saul. He's cut off Saul's robe and now he's waving it and telling Saul, you were at my mercy and I didn't hurt you.

In sort of preaching at a distance to Saul, David said, it is said in ancient times, something like, what does it say, wickedness proceeds from the wicked, I think is the proverb he uses. That hardly sounds very wise. I mean, that's very profound.

Wickedness proceeds from the wicked. It seems like my kid could have thought that one up. But actually, when you think about proverbs, any kind of a proverb, you realize that even though they seem simple on the surface, you can think of, oh, there's an application here that one might not have regarded that is embodied in this statement.

What David is saying is, Saul, you think I'm a wicked man. But wickedness comes from wicked man. I could have killed you.

I was good. I had the opportunity to kill you and I did a righteous thing. Why do you call me wicked? Wickedness proceeds from the wicked.

You think I'm wicked. Why didn't wickedness proceed from me, he's saying. And so he quotes that proverb.

And there's a number of other cases. In 1 Kings chapter 20, another proverb that was apparently known in the time, in verse 11, it says, So the king of Israel answered, this is when Ben-Hadad, the Syrian, was attacking Israel and King Ahab had received sort of a boastful threat from the king of Syria. And Ahab answers, he says, Let not the one who puts on his armor boast like the one who takes it off.

What does that mean? It means don't count your chickens before they hatch. You know, the king of Syria was saying, I'm going to leave so little of you after this war that it will be hard to find particles big enough to collect of you. I'm going to smash you that small.

And Ahab said, let not the one who is putting on his armor boast like the one who has taken it off. In other words, you're just going into battle, getting dressed well. You talk big if you want to when you're done.

When you're taking your armor off and the battle's over, then we can see who won. That's what he's saying. He's saying basically the same thing we'd say, don't count your chickens before they hatch or something like that.

But apparently it was one of the proverbs such as the Jews would appreciate. In Jeremiah 31 and verse 29, there is a proverb that is actually repeated a few times also in Ezekiel. In chapter 18 and such.

Apparently the Jews, some of them were saying, the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the son's teeth are set on edge. Now what does that mean? The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge. Well, your teeth being set on edge means you're grimacing.

Like if you eat something you don't expect to be sour, and it's sour, super sour, it makes you grimace. It's saying our fathers ate the sour grapes, but we're the ones who are grimacing. We are experiencing the negative repercussions for what our fathers did.

That's really what they're saying in that. And of course, Jeremiah and Ezekiel both quote that proverb, and they both say it's not true. Basically they say you're suffering for your own sins, not your father's sins.

But apparently that was like a proverb. How come our fathers had to eat the sour grapes, or they got to eat the sour grapes, they didn't grimace, we grimaced. There's kind of a bit of almost a humor in some of these.

And Jesus quoted a saying in Luke chapter 4 when he was preaching in the synagogue of Nazareth, and he said to the audience, he says, You will likely say to me this proverb, Physician, heal yourself. Now, what does that mean? It's like the old idea that the cobbler's family is the only one who goes without shoes. You know, I mean, Physician, heal yourself, was basically a matter of saying take care of yourself and your kin first.

And in the context that Jesus quoted, he went on to say, You will probably say to me, Physician, heal yourself, the things we heard you do in Capernaum, do here in your own hometown. In other words, you're out doing miracles and preaching in other towns, why don't you take care of your own kin here at home first? Why don't you do the same things here in your own family, in your own neighbors, and so forth. Like a physician should heal himself, and by extension, those who are near him, before he goes out and helps foreigners.

And so that's how that particular proverb was being used. Jesus apparently quoted other proverbs. There's one in John chapter 4, where when the woman at the well had gone to gather the people from her village, and the disciples came back and Jesus said, I've sent you to harvest where other men have sown.

He says, do you not say, four months and then comes the harvest? He says, I say, behold, the harvest is white, the fields are white unto harvest. Now that statement, four months and then comes the harvest, was a proverb, which was sort of like saying Rome isn't built in a day. You want a harvest, you're going to have to wait for it.

You plant your seeds and you're going to have to wait four months before you can harvest it. That was a saying, that was a proverb. And he says, do you not say, four months and then comes the harvest? It's just sort of like anything good, you're going to have to wait for it.

Patience, all things come to those who wait, or whatever. There are different kinds of proverbs, and Jesus made reference to more than one, I believe, in the book of John also. But these are just samples of the kind of proverbs that they said.

I don't know about you, but I really like proverbs. I like sayings, not only the biblical ones, I kind of like getting books of quotes. I like poor Richard's almanac.

I like witticisms from Mark Twain and Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln and others. It's kind of neat when someone can just distill something really profound into a saying that has a lot of different applications. That's what a proverb typically is.

I mentioned that not only were there witty sayings around and witty people, but there were many of them that were official wits. They were court counselors. I mentioned Ahithophel.

Ahithophel also was another one in 2 Samuel 17. These two both gave counsel to Absalom when he rebelled against David. Ahithophel was quite a formidable opponent to Hushai, but Hushai was secretly loyal to David, but both of them were counseling Absalom.

Ahithophel gave counsel to Absalom that would have probably, had it been followed, would have probably been the end of David. Hushai was David's plant in there. He was David's friend, but he was still there acting like he was loyal to the new king, Absalom.

David prayed that Hushai's counsel could defeat the counsel of Ahithophel because Ahithophel was asking about an oracle of God. Hushai gave very cunningly counsel that was more impressive than Ahithophel's, and it actually gave David a chance to escape, and it ended up being the death of Absalom, which is what Hushai wanted. Anyway, these were men who were attached to the Jewish court as counselors.

In Proverbs, you've no doubt heard the Proverbs that says, in the abundance of counselors there is safety. That's actually talking, Solomon as a king, is talking about receiving counsel for making court decisions. In another Proverbs, Proverbs 20 and verse 18, he said, well, let me read it.

He says, with much counsel make war, but the whole Proverbs, I'll need to look up in order to get the whole thing. Proverbs 20 and verse 18, he says, plans are established by counsel, and by wise counsel wage war. This is a king saying, we need to get some counsel from people before we set our strategies and launch our campaigns of any significance.

In Jeremiah 18, there's actually a reference to the three places I mentioned that people got words from God, from the law, from the prophets, and from the wisdom. Those who were opponents of Jeremiah in Jeremiah 18 were saying this to basically discount his message. They're saying in verse 18, Come, let us devise plans against Jeremiah, for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the words from the prophets.

Jeremiah was basically saying, Jerusalem is going to be destroyed. Guidance from God is

going to go away. They're trying to contradict him.

No, that's not true. The law is not going to depart from the priests who teach us the law. Wisdom is not going to depart from the wise.

No, the word is not going to depart from the prophets. We're going to have all those things in perpetuity, which is what Jeremiah was denying. But you see, they mention those three different things, which I mentioned earlier.

This is how people were accustomed to hearing from God. Wisdom from the wise was right up there with the other two ways that God might make his will known to people in the prophet setting. Now, Solomon, of course, was the epitome of Hebrew wisdom.

According to scripture, God gave him a gift of wisdom that was above that of any other man. Although we have to take that in context, because the Bible does not indicate that he was always that wise. I mean, he actually departed from the Lord, which is not a wise thing.

He actually did not follow his own proverbs, his own counsel. And so, although he knew a lot of stuff, he wasn't always wise enough to follow it. But in his youth, Solomon saw and heard things that caused him to really value wisdom as at least a commodity to be sought.

We have him talking about his upbringing on his father's knee in Proverbs chapter 4, and we see what David, his father, taught him. In Proverbs 4, verses 3 through 9, it says, Exalt her, that is, exalt wisdom, and she will promote you. She will bring you honor when you embrace her.

She will place on your head an ornament of grace, a crown of glory she will deliver to you. So, this is how David talked about wisdom to Solomon. So, it's not really very surprising that when Solomon, as a slightly older young adult, was told by God, ask anything, you know, he thought, I remember what my dad said.

He said, get wisdom. So, that's what he asked for. Also, Solomon probably, because he was no doubt precocious by nature as well, could observe and draw conclusions from things around him anyway.

For example, a lot of his Proverbs have to do with family life. There's quite a lot of Proverbs about disciplining children. And we know from 1 Kings 1, 6 that he actually saw a good example of the neglect of that from his father David in the household, because David had one son named Adonijah.

David was the king and all his sons were princes. They were a bunch of spoiled brats for the most part. And Adonijah, according to 1 Kings 1, 6, it says David had never rebuked Adonijah in any way.

Had never even said, what are you doing? Or why are you doing that? So, in other words, Adonijah was raised totally unaccountable, without discipline, without instruction from his father. And he rebelled. And actually, eventually Solomon had him killed for rebellion.

But Solomon then wrote a number of Proverbs about the need to discipline and train children properly. So, we can see that Solomon had exhortation from his dad. And he had household examples of some of the things that he saw.

We'll talk about another one a little later. I think it's rather humorous, but some of his Proverbs are about contentious women. But I think he had a few of those in the house too.

But you can't much blame them when they're trying to share them with 99 other women. But of the same rank as themselves in the family. In Chinese, they say that the Chinese characters are, each character is a word.

And a lot of them are developed from putting two of them together. And they say that in Chinese, the character for, I think, the word that means impossible is the two women under one roof. They actually have two women and a roof over them.

And that's the Chinese character for impossible. Imagine a thousand women under one roof. All of them in charge of the kitchen.

That would be really difficult. Solomon had some problems with some of his wives. But I dare say he asked for it.

Now, not only were these early influences in Solomon's life toward wisdom, toward valuing wisdom. But we're told in 1 Kings chapter 3, in 1 Kings chapter 3, we have Solomon just after he's come to power as king, after his father has died. And God meets him at Gibeah, I believe it is.

And gives him, makes quite an offer to him. And tells him to ask for anything he wants to. It's in chapter 3, verse 4. It says, the king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the great high place.

Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. At Gibeon, the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night. And God said, ask, what shall I give you? And Solomon said, You have shown great mercy to your servant David, my father, because he walked before you in truth, in righteousness and in uprightness of heart with you.

You have continued this great kindness for him, and you have given him a son to sit on his throne as it is this day. By the way, that was a great kindness because there had never been a king who was the successor of his father in Israel before. Saul was the first king, and his son did not succeed him.

David was the second king, and now Solomon was the first king that could be said to be hereditary. He was the first hereditary king, and so he sees this as a unique mercy that God had shown to David in giving him a hereditary successor. And verse 7, Now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king instead of my father, David.

But I am a little child. This is a bit of a hyperbole. He was a young adult, but he felt like he was incompetent to rule a country like a child.

I do not know how to go out or come in, and your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted. Therefore give to your servant an understanding heart to judge your people that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to judge this great people of yours? And the speech pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked for this thing. Then God said to him, Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for long life for yourself, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have asked for the life of your enemies, but you have asked for yourself understanding to discern justice, behold, I have done according to your words.

I have given you a wise and understanding heart, so that there has not been anyone like you before you, nor shall anyone like you arise after you, except there was at least one greater than Solomon, according to the testimony of Jesus in the New Testament, and that was Jesus himself. And I have also given you what you have not asked for, both riches and honor, so that there shall not be anyone like you among all the kings of all your days. So if you walk in my ways to keep my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days.

And so we have, as it were, a promise from God that Solomon would have unexcelled wisdom like no one else. Now this business that no one before you or no one after you will ever be as wise, we have to understand that's a Jewish idiom too. We actually have a number of cases in the Bible where that kind of thing is said about something that is not really intended to be taken as absolutely unique.

It's a hyperbole. For example, the locust plague in Egypt in Exodus chapter 9 is said to be the locust plague like there were no locusts like them ever before nor ever shall be afterward. And then you've got another one about which the same thing is said in the book of Joel, another locust plague which there was none like it before or none after.

So when they talk like it's absolutely unique, it's not always necessarily to be taken quite literally. You have to understand there's Hebrew idioms in the Bible, and this was one of them, this kind of talk. You know, when Jesus said in Matthew 24, Then shall be great tribulation such as was not since the world began nor ever shall be.

Taking that quite literally, that would mean that he's talking about a period of tribulation that's unequaled, unrivaled, unique in history, nothing as bad or anything like that. But

over in Ezekiel chapter 5, he said exactly the same thing about the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. by the Babylonians. God said, I'm about to do in Jerusalem the like of which I've never done before nor will ever do a similar thing later.

But he did in AD 70. So, I mean, this is an idiom. He's not necessarily telling us that there never ever would be anyone as wise as Solomon.

Because Jesus, like I said, came afterwards and he was wiser than Solomon. Jesus referred to himself as one greater than Solomon. Anyway, the point is, in his own day and probably for most history, you won't find men who had as much of this kind of wisdom as Solomon had.

Although, as it's very clear, it was somewhat conditional. As he kind of departed from the Lord, as we find out later in his life, he seemed to do some stupid things. But we'll get to that in the proper time.

There's a reputation for his wisdom described in 1 Kings chapter 3, verse 28. In 1 Kings 3, verse 28, it says, And all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had rendered, this is after he divided the baby, or promised to, threatened to, when the two harlots who were fighting over the same baby, and they both said it was theirs. And Solomon said, well, let's just cut it in two.

You each get half. That sounds good. And that revealed the heart of the true mother.

Because the one who wasn't the real mother just said, yeah, let's do it that way. She wasn't real smart. Of course, people in that profession usually are not college educated.

But then neither am I, and I'm not in that profession. But the thing is, she, I mean, it gave away who was the real mother. Because the real mother said, no, let her have the baby.

Just don't kill it. You know, so Solomon very wisely, apparently he understood women better at that point in his age than later on. So he understood the nature of a woman and a mother.

And so it says in verse 28, All Israel heard of the judgment which the king had rendered, in this case, and they feared the king, for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to administer justice. That's basically pretty much what we're going to have to see his wisdom as. It was the wisdom of God to administrate justice.

As far as personal behavior, he didn't always act that wisely. But as a ruler, that's what he really asked for. When God said, what shall I give you? He said, well, I don't have the wisdom to judge.

I have to rule these people. Give me wisdom. He says, okay, I'll give you the wisdom to

rule.

You're going to have to watch your own private life. Because you don't have a guarantee that you're going to always do the wise thing if you're not careful to be loyal to the Lord. And that was his problem at one point.

He ceased to be loyal to the Lord. In chapter 4, verse 29 through 34, we have another description of his wisdom. 1 Kings 4.29 It says, And God gave Solomon wisdom and exceedingly great understanding and largeness of heart, like the sand on the seashore.

A very typical Hebrew idiom you'll find used in many ways in the Old Testament. Thus Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the men of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. Egypt also was reputed for having its wise men.

By the way, so did the Babylonians. You might remember when Nebuchadnezzar had a dream and couldn't figure it out, he called in his Babylonian, Chaldean wise men first. When they couldn't help him, then Daniel and his friends got called in.

But these ancient societies, they all recognized they needed to have wise men. And, of course, there have been wise men in every society, so they were appreciated in those days. It would be nice if our politicians could find some wise counselors and actually appreciate some wisdom once in a while, rather than just follow agendas.

It would be nice to actually get some counsel from someone who knows what's going on. And so it says, Thus Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the men of the east and of all of Egypt, for he was wiser than all men, than Ethan the Ezraite, and Haman, and Calchol, and Dardah, the sons of Mahal. Apparently Mahal had some wise sons.

Probably Haman, Calchol, and Dardah were all the sons of Mahal. Pretty wise family, I guess. And his fame was in all the surrounding nations.

He spoke 3,000 Proverbs, of which we only have a small sampling. We have about, in our book of Proverbs, maximum, there's got to be around 1,000, a little over 1,000 verses probably. But there's a lot more of where that came from, apparently.

He spoke 3,000 Proverbs, and his songs were 1,005, of which we have one of them or two. Psalm 127 is a song written by Solomon. That's the one about children being a heritage of the Lord, and like arrows in the hands of a mighty man, and blessed is the man who has his quiver full.

That's the one that begins, unless the Lord builds a house, the labor and vain that built it. Interesting that Solomon wrote that since he built the temple after this time. But he wrote, what's it say, 1,005 songs.

So we have Psalm 127 is one of those, and we have the Song of Solomon, which is

apparently his favorite one, because it's not really called the Song of Solomon in the text. It's always called the Song of Songs. It's the ultimate song of Solomon.

And so you get an idea of where his talents lay along those lines by seeing the cream of his compositions there. It says in verse 33, he also spoke of trees, from the cedar tree of Lebanon to the hyssop that springs out of the wall. That is, he observed nature and made observations about it.

He spoke of animals, of birds, of creeping things, and of fish. We have some examples of those things in the Book of Proverbs. And men of all nations, from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom, came to hear the wisdom of Solomon.

And of course we know specifically of the case of the Queen of Sheba, who came from apparently somewhere in southern Arabia. She had heard about his wisdom, and she came to just hear him speak. And it took her breath away.

She was amazed. She said, I have heard of your wisdom and your glory and all that stuff. And she says, the half wasn't told me.

Yeah, the half that wasn't told her was the part in Ecclesiastes, about how all this emptiness and vanity. That's the half that he didn't tell her. But she said, and the half was not told me.

And so she was very impressed. And according to Ethiopian tradition, she and he had a baby together, which formed the dynasty of the Ethiopians. But that's part of old Jewish tradition, not Biblical.

Probably not true. There's some interesting rabbinic stories about that particular thing, about when she came to visit him and how he seduced her and so forth. The century of the rabbis would make up legends about how the kings seduced queens and things like that.

But Solomon didn't have too much of a reputation to defend in that area. In 1 Kings 10, verses 6-9, it says, Then she, this was Queen Yeshiva, she said to the king, It was a true report which I heard in my own land about your words and your wisdom. However, I did not believe the words until I came and saw with my own eyes.

And indeed, the half was not told me. Your wisdom and prosperity exceed the thing which I heard. And happy are your men, and happy are these, your servants, that stand continually before you and hear your wisdom.

Blessed be the Lord your God, who delighted in you, setting you on the throne of Israel, because the Lord had loved Israel forever. Therefore he made you king to do justice and righteousness. Her story is spoken of especially as how impressed she was with his wisdom.

And of course, he was world famous, at least in the world of those days. However, in 1 Kings 11, we have the downfall of Solomon. And his downfall was women after all.

He said, but in verse 1 of chapter 11, The king Solomon loved many foreign women. The problem with foreign women especially was their religion. Israel was God's people.

They had a religious system and belief system that God had given them. All the other nations were pagans. They worshipped demons.

They called them gods, but the Bible says they were demons they were worshipping. And so, these women, the problem is very largely that they were foreign women. Now, he married them probably because they were, in some cases, no doubt political alliances.

You find throughout Scripture, it's not uncommon for the son of one kingdom to marry the daughter of another kingdom. And this was sort of like making a guaranteed mutual non-aggressions pact. These nations were joined by marriage.

But I don't think there were a thousand nations around for Solomon to marry. So, he overdid it a little bit. But it says, King Solomon loved many foreign women as well as the daughter of Pharaoh.

Women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites from the nations of whom the Lord had said to the children of Israel, You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods. Solomon clung to these in love.

And he had 700 wives, princesses, so they were apparently political marriages in many cases, 300 concubines, and his wives turned his heart away from the Lord. And so, that's really almost the end of the story of Solomon as we have it. Later on, we find that God is angry at Solomon for this.

He actually sends a prophet to Solomon to tell him that he's going to divide the kingdom in Solomon's son, Rehoboam's day. And then God raises up this man, Jeroboam, who's like a foreman on the temple building crew, to be the new king. But Solomon hears about it and tries to kill the guy.

The guy flees to Egypt. And then after Solomon's dead, the guy is called back to be the king of the northern confederacy of the tribes. But the point is that Solomon just goes bad.

And we never read of him going good again. In the historical books, we never read of Solomon turning back to God. But we do have the book of Ecclesiastes, which is clearly written by him as an old man.

He makes many references, especially in Ecclesiastes chapter 12, the end of the book, about how old age is. And he's exhorting the young men to be smarter than he was, to seek the Lord in their youth while they still have their vigor and their strength. And if you've read the book of Ecclesiastes, it's a confusing book.

Because it says all kinds of things that aren't true. But they are true in the sense of what they're said. He says, I was seeking for something away from God, essentially.

He says, under the sun. I was looking for, it's like repeated three dozen times in the book or something, under the sun, under the sun. He's saying, considering only the earthly plane and not considering God.

I was seeking satisfaction. I tried everything. I had all the money in the world.

I had all the women in the world. I had all the power in the world. I could do whatever I wanted.

I tried education. I tried women. I tried parties.

I tried alcohol. I tried horticulture. I tried music.

I tried everything. And what's he say again and again? It was all emptiness, vanity, like striving after the wind. And so Ecclesiastes is like his testimony.

Sort of like you hear people give their testimony how they got saved. They say, well, I used this much drugs and I did this much bad stuff and then I got saved. He's basically, Ecclesiastes is saying, this is what I was doing wrong.

I was seeking man's chief good without God. And I went through this. I went through this.

I reasoned this way. I thought this way. And some things he thought were not right.

He's just giving a testimony about how wrong he was, how wrong he philosophized when God wasn't in his thinking. But at the end of the book, he says, you young men, you need to serve God. And at the very last verses of Ecclesiastes, at the very end, he says, let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter.

Fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man. For he'll bring every work into judgment, whether it be good or evil. So the idea seems to be that in his old age, although the book of Kings doesn't tell us so, Solomon apparently came back to God with many regrets about his wasted years.

If we didn't have the book of Ecclesiastes, we wouldn't know that. We would just think his last state was accident. So this is the man who wrote the book of Proverbs, who wrote Ecclesiastes, and who wrote Song of Solomon.

And the man whose wisdom we're going to be reading. Presumably he wrote Proverbs when he was on the upstream of his spiritual life. There's a lot of references to the fear of the Lord and so forth there.

Of course, a lot of it is just the kind of things that a wise observer might be able to say, even if he wasn't a believer. It's just common practical wisdom in many cases. Now, wisdom of the Hebrews was distilled into a number of forms, a number of literary forms.

And I've got some of them listed here under D on your notes, and I'm mindful of the time. The first form would be a proverb. What is a proverb? It's a short, pithy saying or an aphorism that distills into a short statement.

Probably a general truth. That might have many, many applications in different situations. A proverb becomes proverbial.

A saying becomes proverbial, meaning it is remembered and it spreads throughout the culture. People say it all the time. It transcends generations.

It's passed down because it embodies something that is so universally helpful to remember. A penny saved is a penny earned, you know. An apple doesn't fall far from the tree, you know.

There's all kinds of pithy little statements like that that make an observable, universal kind of a truth. And that's what a proverb is. It's not the only form of distilled wisdom in the wisdom literature, but that's one, and the book of Proverbs is named after such things as that.

Now, I should also point out this. I have to point out at some point, this may be as good a point as any. The books of wisdom are written in poetry.

That's going to be something important to note. They are not the only parts of scripture written in poetry. In fact, a huge portion of the Old Testament is written in Hebrew poetry.

The book of Job is written in poetry, apart from the first two chapters and the last few verses. Almost the entire book of Job is in poetry. Psalms, of course, the biggest book in the Bible, is all poetry.

Proverbs is entirely poetry. Ecclesiastes is poetry. Song of Solomon is poetry.

And in the prophets, the vast majority of the chapters in the prophets are written in poetry also. In our modern Bibles, if you have the King James Version, it won't show, because the way they set the text in the King James is a certain way, but all modern Bibles set up the text of Hebrew poetry differently than anywhere else. Like, for example, just take any page.

Look at 1 Kings if you happen to be open there. That's what we're looking at. There's no poetry on a whole page.

It just looks like blocked text. But if you turn to any page in the Psalms, we can see something else. You can see it's not like blocked text.

It's in verse. They usually have the second line indented a little bit or something just to make it look like poetic verse. The way the text is set in our modern Bibles will give it away.

Now, if you turn to almost any passage at random in the prophets of the Old Testament, you'll find that they are also in poetry. You can tell by the way the text is set. Occasionally there's some blocked text, some narrative in the prophets, but almost the whole books of the prophets are in poetry with some few exceptions.

And so poetry is a very important genre of biblical literature. And the main thing that you will observe about poetry in Hebrew is not what you'd observe in poetry in English. Most English poetry is recognizable by its rhyme schemes.

Rhyming is what we think poetry is supposed to do. Some poets don't bother to make rhymes, but their work is sort of like free-form jazz or something in music. I guess there's free-form jazz poetry that doesn't follow any of the conventions of poetry, but of course in English we know that poems are supposed to rhyme.

Not so in Hebrew. In Hebrew, poems are supposed to repeat themselves. That's the main thing about poetry is you say the same thing at least twice, sometimes three or four times the same thing in slightly different words.

Now, I don't know if this is mainly for the sake of clarification or if it's just an aesthetic taste they had that they think it's pleasing to the ear to hear the same thing said more than one way. But you'll find that almost all, well, essentially all Hebrew poetry is comprised of couplets or triplets. Sometimes there's three or four members of the statement, but you've got repetition.

Not every single verse of poetry is going to be that way, but it's going to be the most common theme. Now, sometimes repetition is saying exactly the same thing a second time. Sometimes it's a contrast, especially in the Proverbs.

The Proverbs typically are these couplets in most cases, but sometimes they're a couplet that's making a contrast rather than something. Let me just see here. I'm just going to pick something random here.

Proverbs 27, 6. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful. Now, this is kind of two sides of the same thing. If someone's your friend, even their wounds they deliver are for your benefit.

But if someone's your enemy, even their kisses have an ulterior motive, like Judas kissing Jesus. There's a kiss of a friend that was deceitful. This is kind of typical of a proverb that would show a contrast.

The wise man is this way, but the fool blah, blah, blah. The diligent man shall tend toward prosperity. The lazy man will tend toward poverty.

These kinds of comparisons and contrasts are very typical of the wisdom stains. Not universal. Some of them don't do that, but they are all in poetry.

Poetry is almost always comprised of some kind of couplets. Not every verse is going to be used couplets. The couplets can be saying the same thing twice, or they can say one thing and then just say sort of the flip side of the coin.

Kind of the same idea, but seen from the other side. This is the way that poetry is written in Hebrew. The Psalms are that way.

Most of the prophetic chapters are that way, too. Proverbs are going to be that way. You've got Proverbs.

You've got also parables or fables. For example, there's a fable. What's the difference between a parable and a fable? A sower went out to sow seeds.

There's a parable. The trees went out to make a king for themselves. There's a fable.

What's the difference between those two things? Sowers really do sow seeds. Trees don't really go out and look for kings for themselves. A fable is not true to life.

Like Aesop's fables. A donkey found a lion's skin and draped it over himself and went around terrorizing the other animals until he decided to roar. Aesop's fables are all about things that don't really happen.

Animals that talk and think and react like people do. In Judges chapter 9, there's a fable like that told by Gideon's only surviving son who talks about trees going out to make a king for themselves. That's a wisdom saying.

It's a parable, but it's not really a parable because it's not true to life. Trees don't do that, so we call that a fable. But parables are like what Jesus told.

Those are wisdom things. Jesus was a Jewish wit as well as prophet and teacher and Messiah and all of that. In 2 Samuel 12, we have that famous parable that Nathan brought to David about the sheep after David had sinned with that sheep and killed her husband.

Nathan said, you know, this man had one sheep and his neighbor had a whole bunch of sheep and the one sheep was like a family member and the other guy couldn't care less

about his sheep. They were just a herd. The rich guy had a guest come over and wanted to steal.

He goes and steals the one sheep from the other guy and says, Dave, what do you think we should do about this guy? Well, you're asking the wrong man if you want mercy. David was a shepherd. He risked his life to spare his sheep from being stolen.

He fought bears and lions to keep that from happening. Shepherds, it's like in the old west, horse thieves, hanging is too good for them, you know. When you're a shepherd, someone steals a sheep, especially your only sheep, especially your family pet.

David said, the man should die. Now that's a rather avant-garde decree about stealing a sheep. Under the law of Moses, you steal a sheep, you give back four sheep.

That's what the law said. You don't kill the man for killing. But David was a shepherd at heart and he let his temper decide that time.

But it was the right answer because Dave said, well, you're the man. That's what you've done. And you're the guy.

You just put out your own death sentence. But God's not going to make you die. He's going to just hurt you.

Anyway, those are parables. That's a form of wisdom literature. There are riddles.

Proverbs 1.6 mentions riddles. And a good example of riddle in wisdom literature is in Judges, Chapter 14, where Samson says, Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet. That's a riddle.

It doesn't sound much like, why did the chicken cross the road? But it's a Jewish kind of a riddle. The idea is, what am I talking about here? Here's the riddle. Can you figure this out? I'll give you a suit of clothing if you can figure this one out.

It's an enigmatic statement that its meaning is not at all clear. And if you can figure out what it is, it's like answering the riddle. That is considered to be a riddle.

There are also number sayings. We won't look at these right now, but Proverbs 30 has a bunch of these. There are four things that puzzle me.

Five blow my mind. And he lists them five. There are six things the Lord hates.

No, seven are an abomination. It's like he can't make up his mind. These number sayings, two things are amazing.

No, three. Kind of reminds me of Monty Python and the Spanish Inquisition. The element of surprise, that's our main thing.

Nope, two things. That's how these wisdom, these number sayings go. And it sounds like the guy can't make up his mind, or he changed his mind after he said the first part of the sentence and decided to correct himself.

But it does it so consistently. You recognize this is a device. Basically it's saying, I'm going to name a certain number of things, but this isn't the total number of things.

There are two things. No, three. Two or three.

Or maybe more. I'll tell you, three. There are six things.

No, seven. I'll list seven. But sometimes six or seven, I'm not giving you the exact number.

There could be more. But the idea is I'm going to give you this many examples of a phenomenon that I've been thinking about. And they are number sayings like that.

And then, of course, we have poems or songs in wisdom literature, like the song of the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31, verse 10 to the end of the chapter. You may not recognize it in your English Bibles, but in Hebrew that's an acrostic. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

And there are 22 verses in that song about the virtuous wife. There are many psalms that are acrostics. Anytime you find a psalm that has 22 verses, it's an acrostic.

It means that each verse starts with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It's just a poetic thing they did. They loved to do this.

There are some psalms that are 44 verses long or 66 verses long. In every case, it's like they're acrostic. If the number of verses is divisible by 22, it's an acrostic.

Like the book of Lamentations is interesting in that because all five chapters are acrostics, but they're different lengths. Some of them have one verse per letter. Some have two.

Some have three. But in the Hebrew poetry and Hebrew literature in general, sometimes they have these acrostic songs. Proverbs 31, very familiar, I'm sure to all of us, is an example of that.

So this is the kind of stuff we're going to find in the book of Proverbs and in the wisdom literature in general in the Scripture. I mentioned that Job is a wisdom book. It's grouped with the wisdom literature.

Obviously, it's an inquiry into the mysterious ways of God and providences of God and why people suffer who don't seem to deserve it. Proverbs, I've summarized that as reflections on a well-ordered life. Basically, Proverbs, looking at how life should be lived.

Ecclesiastes are the concluding reflections of a life of mixed wisdom and vanity. Then there are fragments in other canonical books, little bits of wisdom literature, Proverbs, here and there, even in the New Testament, Paul quotes some, Jesus quotes some Proverbs and so forth. Then there's the apocryphal wisdom books that we don't have in our Bible, but the Catholics have.

There's Ecclesiastes, not to be confused with Ecclesiastes. It's also called the Wisdom of Syrac. Then there's a book called the Wisdom of Solomon that the Jews have.

They're not really written by Solomon. That's why they're not in our Bible. But they are apocryphal literature.

They're examples of Hebrew wisdom literature. That's our introduction to wisdom literature. We're going to then, of course, have a more detailed introduction to the book of Proverbs, but that will have to wait until next time because we're out of time for this one.