



Adult Learning Opportunity  
**Next Steps with the Bible: Going Deeper and Growing Stronger**

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**November 6: Understanding the Wisdom Books: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes**

**1. Review of Week 8: Parables**

- Parables as extended similes: "the kingdom of God is like . . ."
- Parables as mini-narratives within a larger narrative . . .
- Flexible understanding of the significance of the details in light of context. . .
- Assignment: Luke 15 revisited

**2. What is wisdom and wisdom literature?**

- Wisdom amounts to skillfully applying biblical knowledge and truth to life's complexities.
- *Information is not insight*; many "smart" people are not wise people.
- Wisdom is not law to be obeyed or doctrine to be believed but guidelines and insights to be applied as needed.
  - Wisdom books do not share the same form or genre like letters, poems, or narratives do.
  - Wisdom books share the **purpose** of teaching their audience how to live a godly and therefore a successful life in a broken world.
  - Wisdom books don't give us simplistic rules or guarantees for life but general principles and guidelines that we apply prayerfully and skillfully.

**3. Where do we find wisdom literature in the Bible?**

- Job
- Proverbs
- Ecclesiastes
- Some Psalms (e.g. 1, 37, 119)
- Embedded in other books, especially James
- Apocryphal books like Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus) and Wisdom of Solomon

**4. How do we interpret wisdom literature?**

- Historical and literary context remain important: we need to understand the ancient situation external to these books and the internal flow of thought in these books.
  - Job
    - Job conveys wisdom through a narrative meant for our reflection.
    - Job's narrative is framed by third person "omniscient" narrator who supplies a prologue (1-2) and an epilogue (42:7-17). The bulk of the book is tedious dialogue between Job and his three friends (3-31) and Elihu (32-37), leading up to God speaking from the whirlwind (38:1-41:34) and Job's reply (42:1-6).
    - Job is a *theodicy*: it vindicates God from blame when the righteous suffer.
    - Notice how the gritty, *realistic* story of Job balances the potential simplistic and *triumphalistic* interpretation of Proverbs. For example, see Prov 22:6; 37:25 and the discussion of Proverbs below.
    - Notice how Job is mentioned in Ezekiel 14:14, 20 and James 5:11
    - Notice how Paul uses Job 5:13 in 1 Corinthians 3:19 and Job 41:11 in Romans 11:35.

- Proverbs

- A Proverb is a pithy saying, an adage or maxim derived from extensive observation of human experience: "A stitch in time saves nine," "you don't miss your water 'til your well runs dry," etc.

- Biblical proverbs are often expressed through parallelism/pairs/couplets.

*Food gained by fraud tastes sweet,*

*But one ends up with a mouth full of gravel. (Prov 20:17 NIV)*

- Occasionally a short story occurs:

*I went past the field of a sluggard,*

*past the vineyard of someone who has no sense;*

*thorns had come up everywhere,*

*the ground was covered with weeds,*

*and the stone wall was in ruins.*

*I applied my heart to what I observed*

*and learned a lesson from what I saw:*

*A little sleep, a little slumber,*

*a little folding of the hands to rest—*

*and poverty will come on you like a thief*

*and scarcity like an armed man. (Prov 24:30-34 NIV)*

- Proverbs are not promises or guarantees; they are reasonable principles or guidelines.

- Ecclesiastes

- Ecclesiastes conveys wisdom through observing the ambiguities and inconsistencies of life "under the sun" (every chapter except 7, 11).

- A third person prologue (1:1-11) and epilogue (12:8-14) frame the first person narrative of the preacher/teacher's observations that form most of the book (1:12-12:7)

- The emphasis on life as "meaningless" (NIV, NLT) or "vanity" (KJV, NIV) in chapters 1-8, 11-12, leads many to take the book as **cynicism** or bad advice (Eccl)

- A better option is to take the book as **realism** about life in a broken world where, in spite of all the ambiguity, we must still acknowledge and obey God who is the judge of all humanity (1:13; 2:24-26; 3:10-22; 5:1-7; 5:18-6:2; 7:13-14, 18, 26, 29; 8:12-13, 15; 9:1, 7, 9; 11:5, 9; 12:1, 6-7, 13-14).

- Along with Job, Ecclesiastes cautions us from reading Proverbs naively and simplistically.

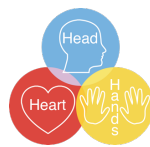
- Fun Fact: The oldest lyric of any number one song ever recorded is found in Ecclesiastes. Do you know what it is? If not, it's *time* you knew.

## 5. Conclusion: Two Kinds of Wisdom in James 3:13-17 (NIV)

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.



*Sanctify them through your truth; your word is truth. (John 17:17)*