

# How to Understand and Apply the Bible

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## Interpreting Wisdom Literature

1. It's easy to misunderstand and misapply wisdom literature.

- We read fragments of these books and don't connect the dots to understand the big picture. Wisdom expresses a point of view, not just isolated verses.

The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:

"Meaningless! Meaningless!"

says the Teacher.

"Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless."

What do people gain from all their labors

at which they toil under the sun? (Eccl 1:1-3)

- We don't know how to reconcile some of the wisdom literature against other literature in the Bible (like the Gospels).

Stay away from a fool,

for you will not find knowledge on their lips. (Prov 14:7; NIV)

- Some Wisdom literature contains the perspective of those who are not wise, for the purpose of setting a contrast.

Does God pervert justice?

Does the Almighty pervert what is right?

When your children sinned against him,

he gave them over to the penalty of their sin. (Job 8:3-4)

- Wisdom is derived from different sources in our world (including practical experience and other religions); we confuse the general concept of wisdom with the wisdom literature in the Old Testament.

2. Wisdom literature provides principles of purposeful living from a divine perspective in the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and Song of Songs (aka the Song of Solomon). There are portions of Psalms that also qualify as wisdom literature.

- Wisdom is woven into the creation.

By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations,  
by understanding he set the heavens in place;  
by his knowledge the watery depths were divided,  
and the clouds let drop the dew. (Prov 3:19-20)

- This type of wisdom begins with (and depends on) maintaining a perspective on God.

Instruct the wise and they will be wiser still;  
teach the righteous and they will add to their learning.  
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,  
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. (Prov 9:9-10)

Do not be wise in your own eyes;  
fear the LORD and shun evil. (Prov 3:7)

- Wisdom has, as its goal, the kind of life God intends for us—a life of holiness and purpose.

### 3. Wisdom continues to be a focal point in the New Testament.

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. (James 1:5)

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. (Eph 5:15-18)

4. Wisdom is not prophecy; it does not reveal. It is not very interested in delivering insight into the eternal; it does not point us to God's bigger plan. It shows us how to have a life "under the sun" that takes into account the principles God has woven into the creation, including into humanity.

## Proverbs

1. Proverbs is *prudential* wisdom: Simple either-or, memorable sayings that paint a picture of a wise life vs a foolish life.

2. They were written in a poetic style that made them easy to remember.

Do not withhold discipline from a child;  
if you punish them with the rod, they will not die.  
Punish them with the rod  
and save them from death. (Prov 23:13-14)

3. The book follows a simple organization:

Proverbs 1-9: Speeches

Proverbs 10-30: Sayings

Proverbs 31: Portrait of a wise person (the wife of noble character)

### Caution in Interpreting Proverbs

1. A proverb is a brief, particular expression of truth. The briefer and more particular it is, the less likely to be universally applicable and totally precise.

Commit to the LORD whatever you do,  
and he will establish your plans. (Prov 16:3)

2. Proverbs use poetic language for emphasis and memorability.

The words of the reckless pierce like swords,  
but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (Prov 12:18)

3. Proverbs teaches principles, not promises. It explains the kind of life that proceeds from making choices that are wise in God's eyes; it does not guarantee outcomes.

If a ruler listens to lies,  
all his officials become wicked. (Prov 29:12)

4. Proverbs paint a practical picture of life under the sun but must not be taken to imply that all that matters is a wise viewpoint on life under the sun.

Do not be one who shakes hands in pledge  
or puts up security for debts;  
if you lack the means to pay,  
your very bed will be snatched from under you. (Prov 22:26-27)

5. Proverbs sometimes can apply directly to our lives but at other times need to be updated in light of cultural forms.

Better to live on a corner of the roof  
than share a house with a quarrelsome wife. (Prov 25:24)

## **Job**

1. The book of Job is an answer to the question, “Why do godly people suffer?” It is also a response to the question, “How should I respond when life turns horrible?”
2. Job was a real person who lived around the time of Solomon’s reign. (931-971 BC)

As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. (James 5:11)

3. Job is *speculative* wisdom; you must understand the teaching of the book as a whole and not hyperfocus on any point.
4. Keep in mind the structure of the book as you read.

Structure:

Chapters 1-2: Prose prologue: The testing of Job.

“Does Job fear God for nothing?” Satan replied. “Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has?” (Job 1:9-10)

Chapters 3-37: Poetic dialogue: The false comfort of Job’s friends.

Chapters 38-42:6: God’s poetic dialogue.

Chapters 42:7-17: Prose epilogue: The vindication and restoration of Job

## **Ecclesiastes**

1. Ecclesiastes shows us that, relying on practical wisdom alone, you cannot derive the key to life.
2. The viewpoint in Ecclesiastes is focused on life “under the sun” which is the proper focus of wisdom. It does not reveal or factor in God’s perspective on our lives or life in general, but it allows for the reality and truth of that perspective.

What do people gain from all their labors  
at which they toil under the sun? (Eccl 1:3)

Now all has been heard;  
here is the conclusion of the matter:  
Fear God and keep his commandments,  
for this is the duty of all mankind. (Eccl 12:13)

3. Ecclesiastes reminds us that life under the sun is temporary. That means the things we invest our time in, on their own, don't last. Things that don't last don't matter much. On the human side, life doesn't add up very well. That suggests we focus on eternity (Matt 6:19).

Remember him—before the silver cord is severed,  
and the golden bowl is broken;  
before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,  
and the wheel broken at the well,  
and the dust returns to the ground it came from,  
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.  
“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.  
“Everything is meaningless!” (Eccl 12:6-8)

### **Song of Songs (aka Song of Solomon)**

1. The Song is a love ballad. It's poetry written in the style of other ancient Near Eastern poetry.
2. Like Proverbs, the Song of Songs teaches us that marriage and fidelity to one's spouse is wisdom. It celebrates what that looks like—the joy and blessings of a monogamous marriage between a husband and wife, including sexuality.

How beautiful you are, my darling!  
Oh, how beautiful!  
Your eyes behind your veil are doves.  
Your hair is like a flock of goats  
descending from the hills of Gilead. (Song 4:1)

3. We should read the book as an ethical presentation of God's intention for a man and a woman in a lifelong marriage, not as an allegory.