

The Hebrew word for “proverbs” is “*meshalim*” which can be translated, “*figures of speech*”, “*parables*” or “*specially contrived sayings*”. It can also mean a “*taunt*” or “*oracle*”. The Hebrew meaning is much *broader* than our simple definition in English, “a short saying stating a general truth or piece of advice. The “*foundation*” for understanding all proverbs is “the Fear of the Lord” (1:7, 9:10, etc.)

A Proverb is basically a short or brief expression of a general, practical truth. It may be very short, as a “*couplet*” (expressed in 2-4 lines) or in a simple allegory. Allegorical proverbs may be several verses long, but focus on one general truth. There are also “*numeric proverbs*” where a list of several things are grouped together, but they are still expressing one general truth. Contrasts and comparisons are used often which give a “*positive / negative*” view.

WISE ADVICE

This is practical wisdom, not spiritual doctrine. They present basic attitudes towards various situations and relationships within daily life. Similar to the practical instruction given in the “*Sermon on the Mount*” (Matt 5–7). Spiritual truth is not necessarily doctrinal.

References to God and godliness are related in a general sense to security in this life and having a hope beyond life on earth. They are not related to salvation in an evangelical sense. For example, in Prov 10:27-32 – these verses describe the general truth of a life honoring the Lord being blessed by the Lord in contrast to those who don’t honor the Lord.

They present moral and ethical values, not legalistic requirements or laws. Righteousness and goodness are related to a person’s integrity of character, not their spiritual condition or relationship with God. For example, in Prov 14:2, 16, 27, 31 – these verses relate to the quality of character of a person honoring the Lord in comparison to those who do not honor the Lord.

Values are most often seen contrasted and compared between “*wisdom*” and “*folly*”. Also, laziness and diligence, or honesty and falsehood, and so on.

VALUE OF PROVERBS

These are guidelines for life which are easy to learn and remember, giving valuable guidance. Parallelism provides a similar rhythm in Proverbs as in other Hebrew Poetry. All forms of parallelism are found, but antithetic parallelism is probably the most common, especially in Chapters 10 through 24.

Repetition and common terms are used frequently, similar to proverbs of most cultures. This makes the sayings easier to learn and remember. So look for parallelism within each segment or couplet (complete saying in 1 or 2 verses).

Look at the following example from Prov 10:1, 16 – these verses use somewhat equivalent terms expressing contrasting results which makes it “*stick*” in our minds more clearly. A “*wise son, joy and father*” are contrasted with a “*foolish son, grief and mother*”. The “*wages of the righteous bring life, contrasted with income of the wicked “bringing punishment.*”

Common terms have familiar meanings which makes them more relatable. Their meanings were known best during the time of their original writing, so we need to have some historical and cultural background to understand them more clearly.

Proverbs are reliable principles of truth, not absolute laws or guaranteed promises. Proverbs are *not* to be taken too literally. Figurative language is very common and needs to be interpreted and understood properly.

For example, in Prov 6:27-29 – the idea of “*fire*” and “*hot coals*” are very descriptive of the danger of adultery – the idea of “*touching*” another man’s wife simply means “*stay away!*”

Proverbs are not “universal” truths which can be applied in all situations. They express “*general truth*” which advise, suggest or point to what is generally true.

For example, in Prov 12:21 and 13:3 – both of these verses give confidence and advice which are generally true, but not always true in every situation. As to 12:21, unfortunately experience shows harm does come to those who live godly lives, but generally, the wicked will experience greater trouble (*idea of “sowing and reaping”*). As to 13:3, we all speak too quickly or carelessly at times. It simply means “*be careful!*”

The Proverbs are a collection of wise sayings and parabolic or allegorical stories. Many of the proverbs were not original with Solomon, but collected and edited by him, as he was guided by the Holy Spirit. Proverbial Wisdom is expressed in simple, practical sayings. This is made clear in Chap 1:1-7, the introduction for the book of Proverbs. The foundation of Proverbial wisdom is “the fear of the Lord” (1:7).

Practical Wisdom for daily life. Basic attitudes and behaviors which “*model*” a mature, responsible life. A life of integrity having a soundness of ethics and morality. These proverbs are *not* spiritual in nature or content, but intended as basic guidelines for living wisely. Neither are they “*guarantees*”, nor are they absolute promises. The book of Proverbs is known as “*prudential wisdom*”, the word “*prudent*” means “*having sound judgment.*”

INTERPRETING PROVERBS

Proverbs are not “legal guarantees”, nor “absolute promises” from God. Specific language points to a much broader meaning as a guide, as a “*model*” or “*point of reference*” for similar situations or concerns.

For example, in Prov 16:3 – this verse must be seen in its immediate context of verses (1-4), as well as within the whole context of Scripture. Do we truly know the Lord's will? What are our motives? The general truth in this verse is simply for us to search our hearts, trust in the Lord and seek His will.

Proverbs must be understood within their context, both general and immediate. They need to be “balanced” with other proverbs and the Scriptures as a whole.

For example, in Prov 26:4-5 – these verses need to be seen as “part of a whole” within Proverbs and all Scripture. In 26:4-5, we have what may seem contradictory statements. Discernment is needed to know which statement applies to the situation we are facing.

Now in Prov 23:9 – this seems to confirm Prov 26:4. But when we look at Prov 8:4-6, it is clear that “Wisdom” calls out to whoever would listen, even the foolish! This would confirm Prov 26:5.

Proverbs are general truths which are figurative and not specifically accurate. None of the proverbs stand alone as a complete statement of truth. Common sense and sound judgment are needed, what I call “sanctified common sense.”

For example, consider Prov 26:13-16 and Chap 9. Here we see the use of common figurative language. In 26:13-16, very descriptive language gives us a “picture” of the sluggard's nature. In Chap 9, both “Wisdom” and “Folly” are personified as women in this chapter.

The Proverbs need to be understood within their Historical Context. Many of the specific institutions or situations need to be “translated” into a sense which fits our own time and culture. For example, in Prov 25:2-3 and 31:10-31 – both of these references need “translation”.

In 25:2-3, today there are not many nations have reigning “Kings.” So, we must translate “Kings” to a modern and relevant equivalent of a person in authority, such as a president, prime minister, etc. But even this is not truly equivalent.

Prov 31:10-31 is put in an acrostic style which enumerates the qualities of the noble character in a woman as a wife. However, *all* wives should not be expected to do *all* these things. This is a collective “ideal”, somewhat like a composite or collection of noble character traits taken from many noble women.

Remember, the Book of Proverbs is ancient wisdom, not modern, yet the truisms found in it are timeless. Although Proverbs are not by nature spiritual, they are in our Bible and inspired by the Holy Spirit. So, connected with the wisdom and understanding of the Bible as a whole, we will see God's wisdom revealed through them.

Going back to Proverbs 1:6, the NKJV uses the word “enigma” meaning, “a mysterious or puzzling person or thing,” and also the word

“riddle.” This is why we need the Holy Spirit's help along with various study helps. This is how general truth and wisdom becomes spiritual truth to us.

So, it will be very helpful to have a concordance handy when studying through Proverbs, and a Bible with cross-references (in center, bottom or margin columns). You will also find an English dictionary and other versions of the Bible helpful like the NIV, NLT or ESV (other than KJV/NKJV). A study Bible or book on Biblical Manners and Customs will also be useful for helping with the historical-cultural context, and even a Bible Dictionary.

SUMMARIZED GUIDELINES – FOR PROVERBS

[Hermeneutical Guidelines taken from,
“How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth”, G Fee and D Stuart, p 203]

1. **Proverbs are often parabolic— general truth given in a figurative sense.** Always look beyond the way a proverb is expressed for the general truth presented.
2. **Proverbs are meant to be practical and useful for daily life, not theoretical, nor theological.** These “truisms” can *not* be the basis for theology *nor* doctrine.
3. **Proverbs are worded to be memorable, not technically precise.** Whatever details are given are for illustration or example, *not* as limitations.
4. **Proverbs are not guarantees from God, but poetic guidelines for good behavior.** They point us in the right direction of how to live wisely
5. **Proverbs give good advice for some parts of life, but do not cover all aspects of life.** All issues, situations and relationships in life are *not* addressed in the Proverbs.
6. **Proverbs were written during ancient times and may need sensible “translation”.** If *not* “translated” the intended meaning and purpose will *not* be understood correctly.
7. **Proverbs use very specific language, exaggeration, and other figures of speech.** These are used to emphasize whatever general truth is being presented.
8. **Proverbs are not designed to support selfish behavior – just the opposite!** Wrongly used— proverbs might justify a selfish, greedy, materialistic life-style. Rightly used— proverbs will provide practical advice for daily living