

LESSON SEVENTEEN

A SUMMARY OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

As a conclusion to our study in Proverbs, I would like to provide a summary of the book by way of a comparison between the first nine chapters of Proverbs (the wisdom speeches in particular, but not exclusively) and the last chapter of the book. I am proposing the possibility that Proverbs 31 is a poem about Wisdom. You can read through my argument and comparisons and draw your own conclusions.

In Proverbs 1-9, we are presented with three characters who make speeches in an effort to draw the heart of the listener to them. They are the father (and the mother), Wisdom, and Folly. Folly attempts to draw her listener into an intimate, but illicit relationship that will ultimately bring harm and death. Wisdom pleads with her audience to also enter into an intimate relationship with her, but hers is characterized by life, honor, riches, maturity, and blessing. The father and mother make their case to the son on behalf of Wisdom. Choose Wisdom, acquire Wisdom, incline your ear to her, become intimately acquainted with her and you will have a life of blessing. Proverbs 1:1-7 says that the overall purpose of the book of Proverbs is for the reader to know wisdom and instruction, to receive instruction, to give prudence to the naïve. The outcome for the one who listens, who inclines his or her ear, and who diligently searches to make Wisdom and a relationship with the Lord a priority in life will reap the benefit of dwelling securely, discerning the fear of the Lord, and walking in paths of peace.

Proverbs 1-9 roots the fear of the Lord in Wisdom. The two concepts are so interwoven that to search for Wisdom is to know the Lord, and to have a relationship with the Lord is to have Wisdom enter into our hearts (Prov. 2:10). The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom and we are supposed to respond to wisdom in much the same way that we are to relate to the Lord. With this as our backdrop to the book of Proverbs, it seems anti-climactic that the final chapter is a list of qualities that the king needs to follow in order to find an excellent wife. It makes more sense that the final chapter would be a description of Wisdom and what a person's life would look like if they were "married to Wisdom."

My argument is that Proverbs 31 is a poem about wisdom and what she offers to those who enter into an intimate relationship with her, to those who in a sense are "married" to her. I am seeking to prove this argument by comparing chapters 1-9 (where the wisdom speeches occur) with chapter 31. This comparison will explore the recurring themes and concepts that link the two sections. If chapter 31 is a poem about wisdom, and not a description of who we as women need to be, then we have the answer to the question presented to us at the end of chapter nine. Which banquet will we attend? It is no longer an open-ended question, but one more plea for the reader to choose Wisdom. In my opinion, it makes more sense for the book of Proverbs to end on this note. It brings completion to the arguments of the first nine chapters and it enables us to read Proverbs 31 through a different lens. This is not to say that there is not a devotional quality to chapter 31, or that these qualities of wisdom are merely

describing her, but not meant for us to emulate. Instead, we are adding simply discovering more layers to the ever unfolding nature of God's word.

PROVERBS 31:1-9

Proverbs 31:1-9 *The words of King Lemuel, the oracle which his mother taught him: ² What, O my son? And what, O son of my womb? And what, O son of my vows? ³ Do not give your strength to women, Or your ways to that which destroys kings. ⁴ It is not for kings, O Lemuel, It is not for kings to drink wine, Or for rulers to desire strong drink, ⁵ For they will drink and forget what is decreed, And pervert the rights of all the afflicted. ⁶ Give strong drink to him who is perishing, And wine to him whose life is bitter. ⁷ Let him drink and forget his poverty And remember his trouble no more. ⁸ Open your mouth for the mute, For the rights of all the unfortunate. ⁹ Open your mouth, judge righteously, And defend the rights of the afflicted and needy.*

Just as chapters 1-9 presents the father pleading with his son to avoid the wiles of the seductress and to follow the paths of wisdom. It presents both wisdom and folly preparing banquets and crying out for the reader to follow their respective paths, so chapter 31 presents a similar argument. The King's mother also pleads for the king not to give his strength to women or his walk in ways that are destructive in the life and rulership of a king. The first destructive way is overindulging in wine. Then follows the poem about the excellent wife. The mother is instructing her son to choose the wise, excellent woman over the other women who would take the king's strength (presumably the adulteress or temptress). Just as the father, the mother, and Wisdom herself plead for the reader to choose the right path, chapter 31 once again makes the case for wisdom.

PROVERBS 31:10-31

I. PROVERBS 31:10-12

THE MARRIAGE BETWEEN WISDOM AND HER HUSBAND

¹⁰ *An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels.*

¹¹ *The heart of her husband trusts in her, And he will have no lack of gain.*

¹² *She does him good and not evil All the days of her life.*

Her worth—how the husband experiences it—the way in which she treats the husband. This is the relationship.

She is excellent.

She has inestimable worth.

She is trustworthy.

She provides.

She grants security.

She brings good to the life of her husband.

a. PROVERBS 31:10

An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels.

1. Wisdom and the Excellent Wife Can Be Found (through diligent efforts)

The wife in Prov. 31:10 of such inestimable worth that she needs to be diligently sought out. Wisdom is also presented in these terms throughout the book of Proverbs.

2:1-8 My son, if you will receive my words And treasure my commandments within you, ² Make your ear attentive to wisdom, Incline your heart to understanding; ³ For if you cry for discernment, Lift your voice for understanding; ⁴ If you seek her as silver And search for her as for hidden treasures; ⁵ Then you will discern the fear of the LORD And discover the knowledge of God. ⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth *come* knowledge and understanding. ⁷ He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; *He is* a shield to those who walk in integrity, ⁸ Guarding the paths of justice, And He preserves the way of His godly ones.

8:17 "I love those who love me; And those who diligently seek me will find me.

19:8 ⁸ He who gets wisdom loves his own soul; He who keeps understanding will find good.

24:14 ¹⁴ Know *that* wisdom is thus for your soul; If you find *it*, then there will be a future, And your hope will not be cut off.

2. Wisdom and the Excellent Wife are Invaluable/Her Worth is Above Jewels

3:13-15 ¹³ How blessed is the man who finds wisdom And the man who gains understanding. ¹⁴ For her profit is better than the profit of silver And her gain better than fine gold. ¹⁵ She is more precious than jewels; And nothing you desire compares with her.

8:11 "For wisdom is better than jewels; And all desirable things cannot compare with her.

8:18-21 ¹⁸ "Riches and honor are with me, Enduring wealth and righteousness. ¹⁹ "My fruit is better than gold, even pure gold, And my yield *better* than choicest silver. ²⁰ "I walk in the way of righteousness, In the midst of the paths of justice, ²¹ To endow those who love me with wealth, That I may fill their treasuries.

b. Proverbs 31:11-12

¹¹ *The heart of her husband trusts in her, And he will have no lack of gain.*

¹² *She does him good and not evil All the days of her life.*

1. Trust: Both Wisdom and the Excellent Wife are Trustworthy

Proverbs 3:5-6 ⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart And do not lean on your own understanding. ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight.

Proverbs 3:18 She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her, And happy are all who hold her fast.

2. Security: Both Wisdom and the Excellent Wife Provide Security

Proverbs 1:33 "But he who listens to me shall live securely And will be at ease from the dread of evil."

Proverbs 3:13-15 ¹³ How blessed is the man who finds wisdom And the man who gains understanding. ¹⁴ For her profit is better than the profit of silver And her gain better than fine gold. ¹⁵ She is more precious than jewels; And nothing you desire compares with her.

Proverbs 3:16-18 ¹⁶ Long life is in her right hand; In her left hand are riches and honor. ¹⁷ Her ways are pleasant ways And all her paths are peace. ¹⁸ She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her, And happy are all who hold her fast.

Proverbs 4:10-11 ¹⁰ Hear, my son, and accept my sayings And the years of your life will be many. ¹¹ I have directed you in the way of wisdom; I have led you in upright paths.

Proverbs 8:35 ³⁵ "For he who finds me finds life And obtains favor from the LORD.

Proverbs 9:11 ¹¹ For by me your days will be multiplied, And years of life will be added to you.

II. PROVERBS 31:13-24

WHAT WISDOM BRINGS TO THE MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP

She searches.

She works with her hands.

She delights.

She is strong.

She works long hours.

She is intuitive.

A. She clothes her family (this is said in 4 different ways)

Proverbs 31:13, 19, 21, 24

¹³ *She looks for wool and flax And works with her hands in delight.*

¹⁹ *She stretches out her hands to the distaff, And her hands grasp the spindle.*

²¹ *She is not afraid of the snow for her household, For all her household are clothed with scarlet.* ²² *She makes coverings for herself; Her clothing is fine linen and purple.*

²⁴ *She makes linen garments and sells them, And supplies belts to the tradesmen.*

She clothes her household.

She clothes herself.

She clothes others.

As wisdom, she is clothing all of these people. She is investing in all of them a sense of value, worth, and security. She is providing, yet making a statement that those close to her have worth as well. She offers this to her family, to herself, and to others.

What about her clothing? It is expensive and royal. It is also the quality of strength and dignity, which I believe makes the poem less about her ability to make cloth and stitch it together in a nice garment, but more about the qualities with which she herself, her family, and those close to her clothe themselves.

In these verses:

The Excellent Wife Searches/Wisdom Searches

Proverbs 1:20-21 ²⁰ Wisdom shouts in the street, She lifts her voice in the square; ²¹ At the head of the noisy *streets* she cries out; At the entrance of the gates in the city she utters her sayings:

Proverbs 8:1-3 Does not wisdom call, And understanding lift up her voice? ² On top of the heights beside the way, Where the paths meet, she takes her stand; ³ Beside the gates, at the opening to the city, At the entrance of the doors, she cries out:

The Excellent Wife is Industrious and Creative/Wisdom is Industrious and Creative

Proverbs 8:30-31 ³⁰ Then I was beside Him, as a master workman; And I was daily *His* delight, Rejoicing always before Him, ³¹ Rejoicing in the world, His earth, And *having* my delight in the sons of men.

B. THE EXCELLENT WIFE/WISDOM IS A SALESPERSON

Proverbs 31:16, 24

¹⁶ *She considers a field and buys it; From her earnings she plants a vineyard.*

²⁴ *She makes linen garments and sells them, And supplies belts to the tradesmen.*

She is shrewd, and she offers her wisdom and experience to the naïve.

She is also a salesperson and appears this way in chapters 1-9 as well. She is selling truth, she is selling a relationship with God, she is selling life, and she is pleading with her listeners to buy (acquire) her goods.

Proverbs 1:21 At the head of the noisy *streets* she cries out; At the entrance of the gates in the city she utters her sayings:

Proverbs 8:1-7 Does not wisdom call, And understanding lift up her voice? ² On top of the heights beside the way, Where the paths meet, she takes her stand; ³ Beside the gates, at the opening to the city, At the entrance of the doors, she cries out: ⁴ "To you, O men, I call, And my voice is to the sons of men. ⁵ "O naive ones, understand prudence; And, O fools, understand wisdom. ⁶ "Listen, for I will speak noble things; And the opening of my lips *will reveal* right things. ⁷ "For my mouth will utter truth; And wickedness is an abomination to my lips.

Proverbs 8:32-35 ³² "Now therefore, O sons, listen to me, For blessed are they who keep my ways. ³³ "Heed instruction and be wise, And do not neglect *it*. ³⁴ "Blessed is the man who listens to me, Watching daily at my gates, Waiting at my doorposts. ³⁵ "For he who finds me finds life And obtains favor from the LORD.

C. THE EXCELLENT WIFE/ WISDOM PROVIDES FOR HER HOUSEHOLD

Proverbs 31:14, 15, 17, 18

¹⁴ *She is like merchant ships; She brings her food from afar.*

¹⁵ *She rises also while it is still night And gives food to her household And portions to her maidens.*

¹⁷ *She girds herself with strength And makes her arms strong.*

¹⁸ *She senses that her gain is good; Her lamp does not go out at night.*

Proverbs 4:6 ⁶ "Do not forsake her, and she will guard you; Love her, and she will watch over you.

Proverbs 6:20-23 ²⁰ My son, observe the commandment of your father And do not forsake the teaching of your mother; ²¹ Bind them continually on your heart; Tie them around your neck. ²² When you walk about, they will guide you; When you sleep, they will watch over you; And when you awake, they will talk to you. ²³ For the

commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light; And reproofs for discipline are the way of life

Proverbs 9:1-5 Wisdom has built her house, She has hewn out her seven pillars; ² She has prepared her food, she has mixed her wine; She has also set her table; ³ She has sent out her maidens, she calls From the tops of the heights of the city: ⁴ "Whoever is naive, let him turn in here!" To him who lacks understanding she says, ⁵ "Come, eat of my food And drink of the wine I have mixed.

D. THE EXCELLENT WIFE/WISDOM PROVIDES FOR OTHERS

²⁰ *She extends her hand to the poor, And she stretches out her hands to the needy.*

Proverbs 19:17 One who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD, And He will repay him for his good deed.

E. ALL OF HER ACTIVITY IS REFLECTED IN HER HUSBAND (THIS RELATIONSHIP BRINGS ATTENTION TO THE HUSBAND—AS ONE WHOSE LIFE GOES WELL BECAUSE OF HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH WISDOM)

It isn't that the husband is being noticed for his wife's accomplishments, but rather that the relationship that the husband has with Lady Wisdom is reflected in the life of the husband, the way in which he conducts himself, and the way in which he treats others.

There is also a sense that Wisdom is working in a flurry of activity, that she is the one who is actively providing all that the husband needs. The husband sits inactive, passively receiving the benefits of this relationship. This is possibly a picture of what Christ does for us. He is the one who did the work, while we passively receive the benefits.

²³ *Her husband is known in the gates, When he sits among the elders of the land.*

Proverbs 1:21-33 ²¹ At the head of the noisy *streets* she cries out; At the entrance of the gates in the city she utters her sayings: ²² "How long, O naive ones, will you love being simple-minded? And scoffers delight themselves in scoffing And fools hate knowledge?"

Proverbs 8:34 ³⁴ "Blessed is the man who listens to me, Watching daily at my gates, Waiting at my doorposts.

The husband is at the gates is sitting, watching, waiting for Wisdom. He may be there also in a leadership capacity, but in the context of Proverbs it is Wisdom who stands at the gates. If the husband is sitting at the gates, he is sitting at the feet of Wisdom crying out for all that she gives.

Proverbs 2:6-12 ⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth *come* knowledge and understanding. ⁷ He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; *He is* a shield to those who walk in integrity, ⁸ Guarding the paths of justice, And He preserves the way of His godly ones. ⁹ Then you will discern righteousness and justice And equity *and* every good course. ¹⁰ For wisdom will enter your heart And knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; ¹¹ Discretion will guard you, Understanding will watch over you, ¹² To deliver you from the way of evil, From the man who speaks perverse things;

III. PROVERBS 31:25-26 WHO WISDOM IS VS. WHAT SHE DOES

²⁵ *Strength and dignity are her clothing, And she smiles at the future.*

²⁶ *She opens her mouth in wisdom, And the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.*

Proverbs 3:3 ³ Do not let kindness and truth leave you; Bind them around your neck, Write them on the tablet of your heart.

Proverbs 8:6-7 ⁶ "Listen, for I will speak noble things; And the opening of my lips *will reveal* right things. ⁷ "For my mouth will utter truth; And wickedness is an abomination to my lips.

Proverbs 23:17-18 ¹⁷ Do not let your heart envy sinners, But *live* in the fear of the LORD always. ¹⁸ Surely there is a future, And your hope will not be cut off.

Proverbs 24:14 ¹⁴ Know *that* wisdom is thus for your soul; If you find *it*, then there will be a future, And your hope will not be cut off.

IV. PROVERBS 31:27-29 HER FAMILY'S RESPONSE TO HER

²⁷ *She looks well to the ways of her household, And does not eat the bread of idleness.*

²⁸ *Her children rise up and bless her; Her husband also, and he praises her, saying:*

²⁹ *"Many daughters have done nobly, But you excel them all."*

Those intimately involved with her understand her worth and value, those who are related to her, can speak to the blessings she brings to their lives.

Proverbs 4:8-9 ⁸ "Prize her, and she will exalt you; She will honor you if you embrace her. ⁹ "She will place on your head a garland of grace; She will present you with a crown of beauty."

Proverbs 4:18 But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, That shines brighter and brighter until the full day.

Proverbs 7:1-4 My son, keep my words And treasure my commandments within you. ² Keep my commandments and live, And my teaching as the apple of your eye. ³ Bind

them on your fingers; Write them on the tablet of your heart. ⁴ Say to wisdom, "You are my sister," And call understanding *your* intimate friend;

PROVERBS 31:30

V. WISDOM IS ROOTED IN THE FEAR OF THE LORD

31;30 *Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised.*

The King Mother's final words to her son: he can pursue beauty, follow the charms of the adulteress, or he can choose character. The adulteress offers vanity. Wisdom offers a relationship with the Lord and brings praise to the relationship. Wisdom does not rely on her external features, but on the depth of the riches she has to offer.

Proverbs 6:23-25 ²³ For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light; And reproofs for discipline are the way of life ²⁴ To keep you from the evil woman, From the smooth tongue of the adulteress. ²⁵ Do not desire her beauty in your heart, Nor let her capture you with her eyelids.

FEAR OF THE LORD

The concept "fear of the Lord" is intimately associated with Wisdom. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, it is the way to understanding, and it is what opens up a relationship with God. Wisdom and the fear of the Lord offer the same benefits (riches, honor, and life). Both provide security, both protect from evil, and both bring satisfaction. Wisdom embodies "the fear of the Lord."

Proverbs 1:7 ⁷ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Proverbs 9:10-11 ¹⁰ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. ¹¹ For by me your days will be multiplied, And years of life will be added to you.

Proverbs 15:33 ³³ The fear of the LORD is the instruction for wisdom, And before honor *comes* humility.

Proverbs 16:6 ⁶ By lovingkindness and truth iniquity is atoned for, And by the fear of the LORD one keeps away from evil.

Proverbs 19:23 ²³ The fear of the LORD *leads* to life, So that one may sleep satisfied, untouched by evil.

Proverbs 22:4 ⁴ The reward of humility *and* the fear of the LORD Are riches, honor and life.

VI. PROVERBS 31:31

31:31 *Give her the product of her hands, And let her works praise her in the gates.*

So why is this the final verse of the chapter, let alone the book? Quite possibly this verse harkens back to Proverbs 8:30-31. The works of Wisdom's hands are humanity. The ultimate goal of the book is to bring humanity into a relationship with wisdom. Wisdom's works (humanity) will praise her at the gates and so we are given the final answer to the open-ended invitation that is presented in chapter 9. Whose banquet will you attend?

Proverbs 8:30-31 ³⁰ *Then I was beside Him, as a master workman; And I was daily His delight, Rejoicing always before Him,* ³¹ *Rejoicing in the world, His earth, And having my delight in the sons of men.*