

The Structure of Proverbs

1. Proverbs is a favourite part of the Bible for many Christians. We love its short, pithy insights into the nature of life in God's world, and its practical encouragements to live God's way. Share one or two of your favourite proverbs from Proverbs.

- Why do you like them?
- How do they help you in your Christian life?

Most of the individual sayings in Proverbs are very short. Some run for several verses but most are just a single verse, and seemingly stand on their own. And this is how we tend to think of Proverbs—as a fairly random collection of little snippets of wisdom, each of which can be understood and applied fairly easily to our lives.

However, understanding the book of Proverbs as a whole takes a bit more time and effort. As with any part of the Bible, knowing the whole context enables us to apply any individual portion of God's word properly, so that we see and feel more sharply the challenge of its encouragements and rebukes. And Proverbs is no exception

- Read any verses at random from Proverbs 1- 9.
- Now have a look at some verses from chapters 10-31. How are the verses in these chapters different in style?

3. Glance quickly over Proverbs 1-9, and try to summarize the emphasis of these chapters in a sentence or two.

4. Look up the following verses from Proverbs 1-9 (you might like to divide them up among group members). In each case, who is talking to whom? And what kind of 'talk' is it?

- 1:8
- 2:1
- 3:1
- 3:11-12
- 4:1
- 4:10-11
- 4:20
- 5:1-2
- 6:1-3

- 6:20-22
- 7:1-3
- 7:24
- 8:32-34

5. Based on what you've looked at so far, how would you say Proverbs 1-9 relates to Proverbs 10-31?

While some speak of Proverbs 1-9 as the first collection of proverbs, it is more like an introduction or preparation for the six collections of sayings that follow. It is not so much a 'pep talk' as a '*prep* talk', as when a father says, "Come on, son, let's sit down and talk man to man, and I'll teach you what life is all about".

Proverbs assumes that teaching and wisdom ought to flow from parent to child. Moreover, the father is seen as none other than Solomon himself (1:1), the great wise man of the Old Testament. Proverbs 1-9 thus functions as an introductory framework through which we are to read chapters 10-31.

Structure of Proverbs 10-31

Our favourite Proverbs most likely come from chapters 10-31 of Proverbs. This main section consists of six collections of proverbial sayings, each headed by the phrase, "The proverbs/words/sayings of.....(complete the sentences)":

(10:1) "The proverbs of _____."

(22:17) "Pay attention and turn your ear to the sayings of the _____;"

(24:23) "These also are sayings of the _____."

(25:1) "These also are proverbs of _____, compiled by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah."

(30:1) "The sayings of _____ son of _____ - an inspired utterance."

(31:1) "The words of King _____ - an inspired utterance his mother taught him."

Think it through:

- In what areas of life do you think you need guidance and increased wisdom?
- "To obey the Bible is to be the truly practical person." Comment. Is this always true?
- Look back at the favourite proverbs you mentioned at the beginning of this study. How do they fit into the overall structure of Proverbs? How might 1-9 help us to better understand the proverbs found in 10-31?