

# HOW TO STUDY WISDOM LITERATURE

## Which books of the Bible are considered “wisdom” literature?

Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes

## What is wisdom?

- Generally, wisdom is the discipline of applying truth to life in light of experience.  
*Example: It was a wise decision to just go to bed instead of continuing to be unproductive at the lab.*
- True wisdom is closely tied to **godliness**. Every instance of obedience to God is wise, and every instance of disobedience to God is foolish. This is based on something even more certain than experience: God’s Word. See *Proverbs 1:7, Matthew 7:24–27*

### —JOB

*Author: Unknown*

Job shows us the limitations of man’s wisdom: many things that Job’s friends say are true. But largely, it is truth misapplied. They tell him that his calamity is a direct result of his sin while Job asserts his innocence. In the end, God speaks and puts everything into perspective: His ways are infinitely higher than ours. He is wise in everything He does. Everyone is silenced.

### —ECCLESIASTES

*Author: Solomon*

Ecclesiastes is King Solomon’s reflection of the meaning of life. It shows us the process of his thinking until the arrival at his conclusion. During this process, most of his wisdom is cynical (“Everything is pointless. Wise or foolish, good or bad, we’re all gonna die, so enjoy life while it lasts...”). There is good advice and real wisdom interspersed throughout the book, but nothing provides a complete, satisfactory answer until the conclusion: “Fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.”

### —PROVERBS

*Authors: Mostly Solomon; ch. 30, Agur; ch. 31, Lemuel*

PROVERB ≠ LAW

Proverbs is a collection of...proverbs: **“brief, particular expression of a truth.”**

The Proverbs are short and sweet, designed to be easily memorized—not necessarily for theological precision or applicability in every situation. They do not state everything about a truth, but point toward it.  
*Example: “Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, But the hand of the diligent makes rich” (10:4). In this case, it’s not a universal axiom about the financial state of the lazy and diligent but rather a statement about the harmfulness of laziness and benefit of diligence.*

Proverbs holds out rewards such as social acceptance, freedom from poverty, and safety as motivators for wise living. To us, this smells like the “health & wealth gospel.” But it is not evil to desire good things. Proverbs always puts true success according to God’s standards above temporal blessings (11:28, 16:16).

## Guiding Principles

- Proverbs are not legal guarantees from God (22:29).
- Each proverb must be balanced with others and understood in the light of all Scripture (21:22).
- It doesn’t have to be explicitly “religious” to be godly. The physical world and material goods are not evil. Practicality is not opposed to spirituality.
- Some proverbs need to be “translated” into modern equivalents (e.g., 22:11).