YOU CAN MAKE WISE DECISIONS!

God created us with the ability to make choices. And He also offers wisdom to help us make good ones. In this booklet, you’ll glean from the Old Testament books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. Learn why wisdom is directly connected to your relationship with the Lord, and find insights that point you toward wise attitudes, behaviors, and decisions.

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Life is full of daily decisions. What time will I get up? What should I wear today? Will I go grocery shopping? If so, what will I buy? Should I make a doctor’s appointment for next week or the week after?

We also have major decisions that we make at the crossroads of life. Should I go to college? Which one? What job or career should I pursue? I’m dating someone; should we get married? Should we try to have kids? If so, how many?

How important it is to be able to evaluate the options before us in the light of their potential
consequences! What a benefit it would be to know how to make good decisions in the moment. The Bible calls this ability wisdom.

Wisdom is not the same as intelligence. Intelligence can be measured by one’s IQ and refers to our ability to learn facts. Wisdom is more like a skill of living, a knowing how to navigate life’s difficulties in order to maximize success, and is measured by such things as having rich and meaningful relationships with others. Today, this wisdom is often referred to as emotional intelligence or social skill or even street smarts.

Studies conducted over the past few decades has shown that, while there is a very poor correlation between having a high IQ and such positive outcomes, there is strong connection between those who have a high emotional intelligence (or social skills) and good friendships, contentment with life, and the ability to get and maintain a good job.¹

It’s possible to have a high IQ without living with joy and purpose; it’s possible to live a rich, purposeful life regardless of one’s IQ or set of natural gifts. It’s possible for all to live with wisdom.

But how do we learn to live with wisdom?

_Tremper Longman III_

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¹ The classic study is by D. Goleman, _Emotional Intelligence_ (New York: Batam Books, 1995).
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The most direct answer to that question is provided by three Old Testament books that speak about wisdom: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. In each, the central answer is identical: “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (see for example Proverbs 9:10; Ecclesiastes 12:13–14; Job 28:28). God is the source of all wisdom, and for humans to have access to that wisdom, we need to have a relationship with God characterized by “fear.”

These three books remind us, while including the
skill of living (practical wisdom), biblical wisdom is much more profound than simply emotional intelligence.

In the Bible, wisdom and righteousness go together. The wise person is a good person; the fool (the opposite of the wise) is an evil person. One is not wise if they “succeed” in life (for instance have a high paying job), but hurt others in order to get what they want. The wise person cares about the community, not just themselves. Thus, wisdom not only has a practical level, it also has an ethical dimension. A person can’t be wise only by navigating life skillfully (getting a good job), they have to live a righteous life (can’t get that job by hurting other people).

Even more importantly, biblical wisdom is theological in that one must have a proper relationship with the true God in order to be wise. Indeed, the theological level is the most fundamental level as the statement: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge/wisdom” (Proverbs 1:7; Ecclesiastes 12:13; Job 28:28) makes very clear. But what exactly does it mean to fear God?

**The Fear of the Lord**

Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job each teach that wisdom starts with a relationship with God
characterized by “fear.” But why fear? Why not another emotion like love?

We must first realize that this fear is not the type of fear that makes someone run away, but rather is something like the word “awe.” “Fear” of God demonstrates an awareness that the other person, in this case God, is immensely powerful and overwhelmingly wise. This type of fear leads to obedience and shows that the person who fears understands that God is the creator and they are part of his creation. This type of fear removes pride and leads to humility. Someone who fears God likely won’t be “wise in their own eyes” (see for example Proverbs 3:5, 7; 6:17, and many other passages), but receive the teaching that God gives. We should fear God and love him with all our heart, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30).

With this introduction into the nature of wisdom as practical, ethical, and theological, we next look at the three books that speak most about wisdom in
the Bible. We will see that Proverbs gives the most positive presentation of wisdom and its benefits, while Ecclesiastes and Job cautions about the limits of human wisdom.
The Three Core Wisdom Books

Reading Proverbs

Proverbs has two main parts. After a preamble that introduces the book (1:1–7), the first nine chapters contain speeches. The text identifies the contents as the teaching of a father to his son. The larger second part of Proverbs (chapters 10–31) contains actual proverbs.
Proverbs are short observations, encouragements, or prohibitions that often seem like simple, practical advice.

A wise son brings joy to his father,
   but a foolish son brings grief to his mother.
Ill-gotten treasures have no lasting value,
   but righteousness delivers from death.
The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry,
   but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.
Lazy hands make for poverty,
   but diligent hands bring wealth. (Proverbs 10:1–4)

The third proverb in this list is somewhat unusual for actually naming God; the other three are more typical and seem like just so much practical advice similar to what one might hear from American proverb-makers like Benjamin Franklin or Yogi Berra. The truth is, though, that while they do provide the material that allows a person to live skillfully in the real world, they too carry an important message about God.

As an example, let’s focus in for a moment on the final proverb in the list that concerns hard work and laziness. One does not have to be religious to see the point. If someone is lazy, they may not seek a job, and if they get one, they may not be able to
keep it because they don’t get the work done. So it’s clear that the wise course of action is to be a diligent worker and the foolish course of action is to be lazy.

But let’s remember that one cannot be wise unless they fear God. In this regard, we should consider the role of the figure of the woman called Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9 (see 1:20–33; 8:1–6).

Her house is on the highest point of the city (9:3), a place where only one house could stand in ancient Israel—the temple. Woman Wisdom stands for God’s wisdom, indeed for God himself. In Proverbs 9:1-6, Wisdom asks all to come and have a meal with her, an invitation to deep relationship.

At the end of Proverbs 9 (vv. 13–18), another woman, whose name is Folly, appeals to the men (who represent the readers of the Proverbs) to come dine with her instead. Her house is also on the highest point of the city (v. 14), so she also represents a god, but in her case false gods who try to lure Israelites away from the true God.

Reading Proverbs 10:4 in the light of this teaching about the relationship between wisdom and God thus reveals its theological dimension. If people work hard, then they are wise, which means that they are acting like proper worshipers of God. But if they are lazy, then they are acting like someone who worships a false God.
The point is that it is a mistake to read the individual proverbs out of the context of the teaching about the relationship between wisdom and relationship with God. And that is true of all the great practical advice we gain from the book of Proverbs.

Indeed, Proverbs helps us in many areas of our everyday life. A brief and incomplete list of insights that guide us toward wise attitudes, behaviors, and feelings and away from foolish ones include: the use of alcohol (23:29–33); anger (27:3–4), business ethics (11:1, 24–26), family relationships (6:16–19), conflict (26:17, 20, 21), relationships with friends/neighbors (24:28–29; 27:17), planning our lives (16:1–3, 9, 33), dealing with authority in our lives (23:1–3), how to work (10:4–5), how to listen to advice (9:7–9), the danger of pride (29:33), taking care of the vulnerable (8:18–19; 13:11; 28:27), sexual ethics (6:24–29), and much, much more!

But as we glean this great advice, we have to keep a couple important things in mind. We have already talked about the theological message of the book (and see below about reading the book as a Christian). But there are two other crucial points to be aware of; otherwise we will have expectations that will disappoint us.

1. **Proverbs are only true if applied at the right time!**

Timing is everything for the proper application of
wisdom. After all, proverbs are only true when spoken at the right time. This explains why we have what on the surface appear to be contradictory proverbs:

Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him.
Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes. (26:4–5)

These don’t contradict! A wise person knows the right time to apply one or the other. In other words, the wise person not only knows the proverb, but is able to read a situation to know when a proverb applies. “A person finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word!” (15:23). If delivered at the wrong time (early in the morning), even a loud, warm greeting will be taken negatively (27:14). Proverbs do not make promises. They rather tell us how to think and act in a way that will lead to good results all other things being equal.

2. **Proverbs do not make promises!** Let’s take a commonly misunderstood proverb that intends to encourage us to raise our children in the way of God: “Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it” (22:6).

Some mistake this as a promise, and wrongly use it either as a source of comfort for those whose children
have gone astray ("Don’t worry; God promised that your child will come back") or as a reason to condemn ("Her parents must not have raised her right!") as if it promises that all children who are raised “right” will ultimately return to the right way. That is not what the proverb teaches.

Proverbs 22:6 is not a promise, but rather advice concerning the best way to achieve a desired end. Parents can control their input into a child’s life, but still something might happen to draw their child away from following God. We will see that the book of Job will criticize those who take proverbs as promises.

Proverbs helps us understand the nature of wisdom as centered in God (theological) and guiding us toward skill in living (practical), and also toward being a good person which leads not only to individual, but also community flourishing (ethical). We turn next to the book of Job that serves to remind us of the limits of human wisdom and towards the fear of the Lord.

**Reading Job**

Mention the name of Job and most people immediately think of his tremendous suffering. Some people deserve to suffer because they have done harm to others, but not Job. Job was innocent (Job 1:1, 8; 2:3). He didn’t deserve to suffer.
But take a closer look and we see that the book is not primarily about suffering, but wisdom. The plot of the book teaches that human “wisdom” is totally inadequate, but God’s wisdom is unfathomably deep. Human beings should “fear God” and bow before his great power and wisdom.

The book opens by introducing Job using language that could have been taken directly from the book of Proverbs. Job was “blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil” (1:1). Accordingly, he also enjoyed a wonderful life with wealth and a big, happy family (1:2–5).

The scene then shifts from earth to heaven during a time when God was holding a meeting with his angelic servants. God asks one of them (identified as “the accuser”) to report on Job. The accuser affirms that Job was indeed “blameless and upright,” but questions his motivation. Take away Job’s wealth and happiness, the accuser tells God, and Job will “curse you to your face” (1:11).

In response, God gives the accuser permission to take away Job’s family and wealth (1:12–19). When Job stays firm in his relationship with God, God gives the accuser permission to take away Job’s health and subject him to great pain (2:1–9). Even after this affliction, Job remains steadfast (2:10). As he suffers,
Job’s three friends arrive and sit with him in silence for seven whole days.

After the seven days, Job suddenly speaks, and the real action of the book begins. The friends have been sitting with him without saying a word, but now they react to his dark complaint about the “day of his birth” (Job 3). At this point, Job is careful not to grumble directly about God (like the Israelites do in the wilderness), but he comes close. Unlike the laments of the psalms, sung by suffering Israelites, he never at this point addresses his complaints to God directly, which gives the impression that he doesn’t think God will help him.

No wonder the three friends challenge him. They see his complaint as an assault on God himself. So begins a long back-and-forth between Job and the three friends (chapters 4–27). Each friend—Elihu, Bildad, and Zophar—speaks in turn, and Job responds to each. There are three rounds of this debate, but the argument on both sides remains consistent.

The three friends put forward the argument that there is one and only one reason why someone might suffer—sin. If someone sins, then they will suffer. Therefore, if someone suffers, they must be a sinner. Job suffers tremendously, so he must be a horrific sinner.
The three friends are presenting themselves as wisdom teachers who are able to diagnose Job’s problem, and then offer a solution. If Job wants his suffering to stop, then he simply needs to repent!

Job will have none of this! He knows (and we know that he is right!) that his suffering is not the result of his sin. But he is deeply troubled and angry toward God. Why? Because he actually agrees with his friends that only sinners should suffer. But he is not a sinner. Job, who also presents himself as a wisdom teacher, accordingly offers a different diagnosis. He is suffering because God is unjust.

If that is his diagnosis, then what is Job’s prescription for the alleviation of his suffering? Job wants to meet with God and set him straight! At first, he thinks such a strategy is unworkable and ineffective (Job 9), but his confidence builds over time especially as he thinks he might have an ally in heaven to help him (16:18–21). Job here is almost certainly thinking of an angel who might intercede on his behalf (see what Elihu says in Job 33:19–28), but the irony is that we readers know that there is only one angel in heaven that is focused on Job, and that angel, the accuser, is not speaking on his behalf.

Eventually, the three friends run out of steam and the debate winds down with both sides sticking to
their positions. At this point, Job abruptly changes his tune and starts speaking, not about his own wisdom or the wisdom of his friends, but rather of the profound depth of God’s wisdom (Job 28). His powerful poem reflecting on God’s wisdom even concludes with what will be the conclusion of the book: “The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding” (28:28).

But then Job’s mood again abruptly shifts, this time back into complaint mode (Chapters 29–31). Thus, the resolution of the book has not been reached. Job, like all of us who suffer, has a moment of clarity, but then his pain leads him right back into the depths of depression and bitterness.

The resolution has not yet come, and indeed, at this point an unexpected voice intrudes. Not God’s voice, but the voice of another human being who purports to be wise, a young man named Elihu.

Elihu comes across as a self-important, young upstart, who claims to have spiritual inspiration. Yes, he has waited patiently as the elders have talked, but he admits that he has been bursting at the seams and now can’t help but give his opinion (32:15–22).

He is going to set Job straight! But the sad thing is that once he starts speaking he just repeats the same old idea that Job’s suffering is the result of his sin. He
adds nothing new to the discussion. Job does not even bother to respond to him. Indeed, the next to speak and the one who gets the last word is God himself.

We might remember that Job wants to meet with God. He wants to challenge God and accuse him of injustice. He finally gets his wish when God appears to him, but the meeting does not go anything like Job expected.

God addresses Job out of a whirlwind, a sure sign of God’s displeasure. Rather than Job challenging God, God challenged Job: “Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me” (38:2–3).

God then peppers Job with a series of questions, questions that he could not possibly answer. God asks whether Job understands how the world was created and how it is maintained. He asks whether he can provide for the wild animals of the world, whom God himself had created and whom he cares for.

In these questions, God is not answering Job’s question (“why am I suffering?”), but rather he is putting Job in his place. Job is a creature, not the creator. He criticizes Job for questioning God’s justice (40:8).

And Job, eventually, gets the message. He stops his challenge of God’s justice and accepts the mystery
of his suffering by bowing before God’s justice and wisdom. Job submits to God not even knowing whether God would bring restoration and healing into his life (42:7–17).

What then do we learn from the book of Job?

While the book is not primarily about suffering, we do learn an important lesson. Not all suffering is deserved. The argument of all the human characters of the story, Job included, that suffering is always the result of a person’s sin is shown to be false. That lesson is both freeing and scary. It is freeing because when we suffer, we don’t have to look for some hidden sin that caused it. But this truth is scary because it means our suffering is beyond our control. We might (and in fact will, according to John 16:33) suffer in spite of our best efforts to follow God. As we learned from Proverbs, wisdom, righteousness, and godliness do not guarantee a care-free, blessed life.

We also learn something about how to respond to suffering. After Job grows silent before God in spite of his suffering, God announces to Eliphaz: “you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has” (42:7). We have seen that God has had his issues with Job, but he has not “cursed God” as the accuser expected he would. He has not accepted the superficial arguments of his friends. Through his suffering, he has
kept in relationship with God even as he has questioned God’s justice. In his speeches, he not only argues with his friends, but he has also complained to God.

When we suffer, God invites our complaints as long as they are directed to him. We learn this important lesson from the lament psalms as well (see for example, Psalm 77). When we suffer, we should direct our heartfelt disappointment and even anger toward God.

Complaints directed to God, as opposed to complaints about God to others, are perfectly legitimate and even important. To bottle up our anger is counterproductive.

But that said, God does not want us to end up there just constantly complaining. If God chooses not to answer and address our laments, we can ask for the strength to move to psalms of confidence (“even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me,” Ps. 23:4). At the end, Job stops lamenting and sits in silence before the power and wisdom of God.

But the primary lesson of Job concerns the source of wisdom. If we want wisdom, we need to fear the Lord and be in relationship with him. Yes, Job feared God at the beginning, but at the end his fear of the Lord, his wisdom, is deepened through the crucible of suffering.

Job thus provides us with important reminders
about life and relationship with God. Life is not easy. Our best attitudes and behaviors, indeed our relationship with God, do not guarantee prosperity in this life. These important lessons are also the focus of our third book of wisdom, the book of Ecclesiastes.

Reading Ecclesiastes

“Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 1:1).

From the first to the last chapter, the Teacher in the book of Ecclesiastes keeps informing his readers that life is meaningless. What in the world is a book like this doing in the Bible?

We begin by recognizing that the question of the meaning or the purpose of life is one of the most important issues that we face. If life is without purpose, then what value or pleasure can we get from it?

Fortunately, though the Teacher keeps saying that life is meaningless, that is not the final conclusion of the book. To truly understand Ecclesiastes, we must recognize that there are two speakers in the book not just one. The book contains the words of “the Teacher” whose words are found in 1:12–12:7, and a second wise man who is speaking to his son (12:12) and whose words frame the Teacher’s words (1:1–11 and 12:8–14).

We can tell the difference between the Teacher
and the second wise man by seeing that the Teacher speaks in the first person (“I, the Teacher”) and the second wise man speaks in the third person about the Teacher (“He, the Teacher”). Because there are two speakers, we have to discern between the message of the Teacher and the message of the second wise man. Since the second wise man’s words surround the Teacher’s and since he has the last word in the book as he is evaluating the Teacher’s message for his son, the message of the book of Ecclesiastes is likely most closely related to his words.

So what is the message of the Teacher 1:12–12:7? In sum, the Teacher’s central point is “life is difficult and then you die.”

The Teacher has searched and searched for the meaning of life. He looked for it in money (5:10–6:9), pleasure (2:1–11), work (2:17–23; 4:4–6), relationships (4:9–12), power and status (4:13–16), and even in wisdom itself (2:12–17). Each time he fails to find the purpose of life and concludes that life is meaningless.

Why does life fail him as he tries to find meaning in these things?

As he reflects on life, death and injustice rear their ugly heads to stifle his search for meaning. For the Teacher, death is the end of the story. He has no concept of the afterlife. He knows that if he becomes
wealthy, he can’t take it with him when he dies. While wisdom can help someone navigate life, he too will die just like the fool. Then to make matters worse, there is not even justice in the world. He has seen wise people dying young and foolish people living a long, long time (7:15–18).

So what is the best we can do? Grab whatever enjoyment we can while we are still alive. Carpe diem! “Seize the day!” (2:24–26; 3:12–14, 22; 5:18–20; 9:7–10)

But, as mentioned above, the Teacher’s thinking does not represent the teaching of the book. For that, we turn to the message of the unnamed wise man who speaks to his son in the very last part of the book (12:8–14).

This wise man has exposed his son to the Teacher’s sad reflections on life for a reason. He wants his son to realize that the Teacher is talking honestly about life. His conclusion that life is unjust and death ends it all is true. That is, as long as someone only looks for life’s meaning, as the Teacher does, “under the sun” (1:3, the phase occurs twenty-nine times in the book)—that is, apart from the God.

The wise father urges his son (and us the readers of the book) to what we might call an “above the sun” perspective. His last word, and the message of the book to the reader, calls us to “fear God and keep his
commandments for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil” (12:13–14).

The book of Ecclesiastes is an “idol buster.” An idol is anything or anyone that we put in the place of God in order to find the meaning of life. That is what the Teacher did when he tried to find the meaning of life “under the sun” in things like money and pleasure. These idols were inadequate and let him down. They will also let us down if we try to find our purpose in this way. The book urges us to put God first in our lives and then all these other things can find their proper place.

At first glance, the book of Ecclesiastes seems depressing as it talks about the meaninglessness of life. But when we read it closely we see that its message is something to celebrate. We find our purpose as we make our relationship with God the most important thing in our life.

**Final Thoughts on Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes**

Proverbs helps us understand and celebrate the nature of true biblical wisdom. Wisdom is practical; it helps us navigate everyday life decisions. Wisdom is ethical; those with wisdom are good (righteous)
people. They help not only themselves but their friends and the communities in which they live. But most importantly, wisdom is theological; no one can be wise unless they have a relationship with God where they recognize that he is their Creator and the source of all true wisdom. This fear of the Lord leads to obedience. According to Proverbs, wisdom leads to life and folly leads to death.

Job and Ecclesiastes reminds us that wisdom does not make promises. Each in their own way, reminds us that there are limits to human wisdom. This important contribution does not contradict Proverbs at all, but keeps us from reading proverbs as if they are giving guarantees rather than simply telling us the best way toward a hoped for outcome, all other things being equal.

All three of these fascinating books, though, have the same important message. Fear God!
We have given our attention to these three books that focus on the concept of wisdom. But before turning our attention to wisdom in the New Testament, we need to recognize that we encounter wisdom throughout the Old Testament. The Torah, the historical books, the psalms, and the prophets all speak about wisdom and its connection to the fear of God.
Furthermore, certain characters in the Old Testament are noted for their wisdom though on occasion their stories do not end well. Both Joseph and Daniel are called wise as they show their skill in living godly, righteous lives in foreign (Egyptian; Babylonian) courts. On the other hand, Solomon’s story turns tragic at the end of his life. When he first became king, he asks God for wisdom (1 Kings 3:9) and he abundantly illustrated that wisdom in his decisions and actions (1 Kings 3:16–28; 4:29–34). He truly feared God. However, he ended his life as a godless fool exploiting his people. Why? Because he loved and married women who turned his heart toward false gods (1 Kings 11:1–13). Solomon’s life is a good reminder that we can lose our wisdom and destroy our lives by becoming fools.

**Jesus, the Ultimate Wise Teacher**

“And now something greater than Solomon is here” (Matthew 12:42).

At the beginning of his reign, Solomon was the perfect example of wisdom. But, as the Gospels demonstrate, Jesus far surpassed Solomon even at his height! And, unlike Solomon, he never lost his wisdom.

Even in his youth, Jesus surprised people with the
depth of his wisdom (Luke 2:40–52). When he began to teach, the crowds were amazed (Mark 1:22). Paul recognized Jesus as the one “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3).

The New Testament authors even associated him with the figure of Woman Wisdom, whom we saw represented God and his wisdom. Like her, he was “the firstborn over all creation” (Colossians 1:15; Proverbs 8:22–26) and the one through whom all things were created (Colossians 1:16; John 1:1–3; Proverbs 8:27–31).

Living with Wisdom Today

The message to us today is clear. If we want to be wise, we need to develop our relationship with Jesus and listen to and obey his teaching. We need to “fear God” (Luke 1:50; 12:4–5; Acts 9:31; 2 Corinthians 5:11). We are to “continue to work out our salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). Wise people tremble before the holiness of an awesome and
glorious God having a fear that leads to obedience. If we love God perfectly, then that love is combined with fear of God, leaving no space for fear of anyone or anything else (1 John 4:18).
Epilogue
Things to Keep in Mind

We need wisdom to live well in a difficult world.
According to the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, wisdom begins with the “fear of the Lord.” We must learn that we are not the center of the universe, but are God’s creatures. We are most free when we submit ourselves to him in humility in our daily lives, our everyday and important decisions, and even as we suffer.

And though we can learn how to live in a way that promotes flourishing, the books of Job and Ecclesiastes
are careful to remind us that there are no guarantees. Life in a fallen world is difficult and we may suffer even though we don’t deserve it. Still, we are invited to trust God even when we don’t have all the answers.

Finally and most importantly, to know true wisdom, we look at Jesus who is the very “wisdom from God” (1 Corinthians 1:30). We should deepen our relationship with him through prayer and through listening to his teaching from the whole of Scriptures!
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