

THEOLOGY CLASSES · OLD TESTAMENT STUDIES II

Lecture 25: Two Feasts and the Best of Songs: Proverbs Concluded, Song of Songs Opened

Dr. Keith Essex · The Master's Seminary · 91 minutes

BEFORE YOU WATCH

This session finishes Proverbs and opens the Song. Dr. Essex walks the nine-and-a-half chapters that make the son ready to hear, weighs the debate over the proverbs' arrangement, and lands on the reading he has grown into: each proverb a true slice of a whole pie that is never finished. Then the Song of Songs: why the preeminent song resists the allegorical escape, and who is actually speaking. Listen for the two feasts of chapter 9, and for why the initiative of the woman unsettles the Christ-and-church reading.

STUDY SHEET: THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

01 The fourfold shape of Proverbs

The book divides four ways: the introduction (1:1 to 7); the extended wisdom discourse of 1:8 through chapter 9, which is not yet proverbs but the challenge to acquire wisdom, with ten separate calls for the son to hear; the heart of the book, chapters 10 to 29, the proverbs of Solomon and the wise, some 375 Solomonic proverbs in 10:1 to 22:16, the anonymous words of the wise in 22:17 to 24:34, and roughly eighty to ninety more Solomonic proverbs collected under Hezekiah in 25 to 29; and the final words, Agur and Lemuel in 30 and 31, closed by the free-standing acrostic on the excellent wife.

02 Two seducers and a non-consequential age

The opening discourse names the two great hurdles between the young man and wisdom: the criminal man of chapter 1, whose appeal is something for nothing, and the strange woman of chapter 2, whose appeal is pleasure without cost. Father and mother insist that both carry deadly consequences: you think it costs nothing, and you pay with your life. Essex's contemporary note: applying Proverbs today fights not only an alternative wisdom but a society that denies consequences altogether, the dastardly claim that whatever path you take, everything will be fine in the end.

03 The purpose: moral skill and mental acumen

The introduction states the aim: to know, intimately, intellectually and experientially, wisdom and instruction, and instruction is discipline, the reining in of waywardness, for human beings wander like a toddler loose in the house; there is no wisdom without discipline. The proverbs develop moral skill: from the learner's side, receiving instruction in righteousness, justice, and equity; from the teacher's side, giving prudence, the ability to work toward a goal, to the naive, the wide-open gullible one, and knowledge and discretion to the youth, the inexperienced one who thinks he knows more than he does. And verse 5 abolishes graduation: a wise man will hear and increase in learning; the truly wise never arrive. They also develop mental acumen: to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles, which is fair warning that the book will take everything the reader has, seeking wisdom as silver and searching as for hidden treasure, and Essex's gold-rush picture holds: a few nuggets lie in the river, but the real gold is mined deep.

04 The motto: the fear of the Lord

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: beginning as foundation and prerequisite, the point past which no progress in wisdom is possible without submission to Yahweh. Fools despise wisdom and instruction, and this word for fool means the obstinate one, hard-shelled and stuck in his ways, who will not humble himself before Yahweh, and therefore no wisdom will come. Asked how a fool becomes wise, Essex answers: he must humble himself, repent, and apply himself to the wisdom God has given, and it grows harder with age as folly hardens into habit. The world says live and learn, the school of hard knocks; Proverbs says learn and live.

05 The two feasts of chapter 9

The discourse climaxes in two rival banquets. Wisdom has built her house, prepared her food, mixed her wine, and calls openly: come, eat my food, forsake your folly and live. The woman of folly is boisterous at her doorway with the same invitation to the same naive passerby, but her menu is different: stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant, food she has by theft, offered in a whisper, and the section's last words before the proverbs begin tell the end of her guests: he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol. Wisdom is wide open with nothing to hide; folly hisses of a special deal. Nine and a half chapters have made the reader want the feast that leads to life; now he is ready to hear the proverbs.

06 Is there an order in chapters 10 to 29?

Broadly, chapters 10 to 15 favor antithetical comparison and 16 onward more complementary parallelism, but is there arrangement beyond that? Position A, held by Ross in the Bible Knowledge Commentary, says the proverbs come deliberately at random: the reader is meant to supply the order, connecting this proverb with that one heard earlier, the very labor being part of the training, on which view a topical rearrangement like Dr. Mayhue's short-circuits the process. The majority position finds smaller ordered units: Proverbs 16:1 to 9, framed by an inclusio, man plans, the Lord directs, gathers nine proverbs on the Lord's governance of human plans; Goldingay has argued detailed linkage through chapters 10 to 15; and Murphy, Garrett, and Koptak all see collections, while warning that connection-hunting can invent what is not there, and liberals have emended texts to force a preconceived order. Essex declines to surrender the question: perhaps the precise order is simply not presently known, a matter, he smiles, for the millennium.

07 Promise, general truth, or slice of reality?

The second overarching issue is the nature of a proverb, and Essex maps his own pilgrimage across the three answers. Position A, held by most people in the pew: inflexible, absolute promises, and the pastoral flashpoint is Proverbs 22:6, claimed in prayer meetings as a guarantee that the well-trained wayward child must return. Position B, in Garrett and in Dr. Mayhue's terms: expressions of general truth, usually how life goes, but not always. Position C, Hildebrandt's, and now Essex's: each proverb is a slice of reality, true as far as it goes, needing the balance of the other slices, for if a proverb were merely generally true it would sometimes be error, and Scripture's slices are not errors but partial truths awaiting the whole. The proof texts: answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him, and, answer a fool as his folly deserves, lest he be wise in his own eyes (26:4 and 5), both true, the wise man knowing which fits the moment; and 17:27 and 28, where restrained words mark knowledge and yet even a silent fool is counted wise. Wisdom is the whole enchilada; a proverb is one slice, and the pie, like Essex's beloved Marie Callender's, is never finished, which is why interaction with Proverbs never ends.

08 Using Proverbs without abusing it

The chief modern misuse comes not from false teachers but from sincere lovers of Proverbs: believers who latch onto a proverb as a life verse, and counselors who dispense single proverbs as absolute prescriptions, without the balancing slices, is this the moment for 26:4 or for 26:5? The discipline is to keep reading Proverbs whole, topically gathering the slices as Mayhue's book models, so that counsel reflects the balance the book itself builds in: the rod and the encouragement together in child-rearing, speech and silence each in season. Preaching follows suit: chapters 1 to 9 preach as connected discourse, and the sentence proverbs preach best topically, God's wisdom on speech, honesty, work, discipline, children; and Proverbs is tailor-made for the young, Essex's standing answer to the junior-high leader hunting a study book, though the wise man never outgrows it.

09 Lady Wisdom of chapter 8: not a direct prophecy

Wisdom speaks in 8:22 to 31 as the one Yahweh possessed at the beginning of his way, rejoicing before him as the world was made, and every recommended commentator reads her as what she has been since chapter 1: the personification of wisdom, the woman crying out. Her point is that wisdom has a God-given quality, God's own plan preceding creation. The New Testament will say Christ became to us wisdom, and looking back one may say so; but to read chapter 8 as direct messianic prediction in the manner of Isaiah 7:14 goes too far: it is Lady Wisdom commending her virtues, not a prophecy of the Person to come.

10 The excellent wife of chapter 31

The closing acrostic raises its own question: since wisdom has been a woman throughout, is this Lady Wisdom once more, or a literal wife? Garrett's answer convinces: the book is addressed to a son, and the most practical wisdom-decision before him is whom to marry, so the fitting end of Proverbs is the portrait of the woman to seek: a wife of excellence whose worth is far above jewels, a hard worker, a planner, a woman of wisdom who fears the Lord, whose husband is respected in the gates and whose children rise up and bless her. The canonical order confirms the realism: in the Masoretic tradition Proverbs runs straight into Ruth, where Boaz calls Ruth by this very phrase, a woman of excellence, no unattainable ideal but a woman who lived. The chapter is written for the son, not as a checklist imposed on women, and, Essex pleads from experience at the church door, it deserves better than annual resurrection every Mother's Day.

11 Song of Songs: the preeminent song

The Hebrew title, the Song of Songs, which is Solomon's, is a superlative like King of kings: the best of songs. The Vulgate's Canticum Canticorum gives the old name Canticles; the English tradition says Song of Solomon. The relative phrase could grammatically mean by Solomon, for Solomon, or in Solomon's style, and Essex takes the classic reading: by Solomon, the man of 1 Kings 4 who spoke three thousand proverbs and wrote a thousand and five songs; of all his songs, this was the greatest, the finest hit, as Essex puts it, of the hit parade of 970 to 931 BC.

12 The allegorical escape and its problem

Once Solomon is the author, interpreters face the obvious difficulty: how could the man whose own marital life was such a disaster pen this poem of human love? The historic majority answered by removing the human love: Jewish commentators read God's love for Israel, Christian commentators Christ's love for the church. But the allegory stumbles on a stubborn feature of the text: the majority of the Song's words belong to the woman, and she takes the initiative from the first line, may he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth; draw me after you; the king has brought me into his chambers. Essex asks, with a smile, what the church initiating toward Christ does to one's Calvinistic theology; and adds the earthy observation, confirmed by every marriage survey, that it is generally the wife who craves the words of love more, exactly as the Song depicts.

13 Historical readings and the canonical seam

If the Song is history and not allegory, whose history? The readings multiply: the Shulammitte as Solomon's first love, the interpretation most popular in twentieth-century evangelicalism; a later reflection on a lost love; or the shepherd hypothesis, three characters, in which Solomon woos a woman of his court who remains true to her shepherd lover, and the king learns what true love is by watching a devotion he cannot buy. The interpretive decision cannot be dodged by the preacher, and the book is genuinely difficult. Canonically the placement teaches: in the Masoretic order the Song follows Ruth, where Torah-shaped wisdom produced a godly marriage, and the Song then answers the next question, what should the response of husband and wife within the godly marriage be?; while in the festival order the Song stands first among the scrolls, sung at Passover, where the classic mind connected the covenant love established at the exodus with the Song's love.

14 Who is speaking? Labels not in the text

Modern translations assign the lines: bride, bridegroom, chorus. The reader must know these labels are interpretation, absent from the Hebrew; the NASB honestly sets them in the margin, while versions that print them inside the text, as the NIV does, leave the average reader supposing the Hebrew itself says so. The workable clues are the terms of address: the man calls the woman my darling, better, my companion, my cherished one, and most beautiful among women; the woman calls the man my beloved; the daughters of Jerusalem, named four times, form the responding chorus; a king appears, and Solomon by name, his curtains, his couch ringed by sixty mighty men, his sedan chair of Lebanon timber; a shepherd appears three times, pasturing his flock; and through it all runs the imagery of the garden and of wine, the joy shared between the man and the woman. The purpose, stated plainly before the interpretive battles begin: the Song celebrates the marital joy experienced by the man and the woman.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

Proverbs 1 · Proverbs 2 · Proverbs 8 · Proverbs 9 · Proverbs 16 · Proverbs 22 · Proverbs 26 · Proverbs 31 · Song of Solomon 1 · Song of Solomon 3 · Ruth 3 · 1 Kings 4

KEY TERMS

The fourfold structure. Proverbs' shape: the introduction, the nine-chapter exhortation to acquire wisdom, the sentence proverbs of chapters 10 to 29, and the closing words of Agur, Lemuel, and the acrostic wife.

The two seducers. The criminal man offering something for nothing and the strange woman offering pleasure without cost: the young man's two great hurdles, each with deadly consequences a non-consequential age denies.

Prudence for the naive. The teacher's gift in 1:4: the ability to work toward a goal, given to the wide-open gullible one and the inexperienced youth who thinks he knows more than he does.

The beginning of knowledge. The fear of the Lord as foundation and prerequisite: no progress in wisdom without submission to Yahweh, which the obstinate, hard-shelled fool refuses.

The two feasts. Proverbs 9's rival banquets: Wisdom's open table of life against Folly's whispered stolen water and secret bread, whose guests are in the depths of Sheol.

Random by design. Position A on the proverbs' order: deliberately unarranged so the reader supplies the connections, the labor itself part of the training, against the majority's smaller ordered units like Proverbs 16:1 to 9.

A slice of reality. Hildebrandt's and Essex's account of a proverb: true as far as it goes, one slice of wisdom's whole pie, needing the balance of the other slices, as Proverbs 26:4 and 5 demonstrate side by side.

Proverbs 22:6. The pastoral flashpoint: claimed in the pew as an absolute promise for wayward children, rightly read as one slice among the book's whole counsel on raising the young.

Lady Wisdom. The personified woman of chapters 1 to 9, whose speech in 8:22 to 31 declares wisdom's origin in God's plan before creation: not a direct messianic prophecy, though Christ became to us wisdom.

The excellent wife. Proverbs 31's closing acrostic, written for the son as the portrait of the woman to seek, embodied historically in Ruth, the one other woman of excellence in Scripture.

Song of Songs. The superlative title, the best of Solomon's thousand and five songs: on the classic reading, by Solomon, celebrating the marital joy of the man and the woman.

The woman's initiative. The Song's stubborn feature against allegory: most of its words are hers, from may he kiss me onward, fitting a wife's love and confounding the Christ-and-church reading.

COMPREHENSION CHECK: TWENTY-TWO QUESTIONS

1. What occupies Proverbs 1:8 through chapter 9?
 - A. Not yet proverbs, but an extended discourse challenging the son to acquire wisdom, with ten calls to hear
 - B. The first collection of Solomonic sentences
 - C. The words of Agur and Lemuel
 - D. A history of Solomon's reign
2. What are the appeals of the criminal man and the strange woman?
 - A. Power and fame respectively
 - B. Something for nothing, and pleasure without cost, both with deadly consequences
 - C. Wealth and wisdom respectively
 - D. Safety in numbers and secrecy
3. Why can there be no wisdom without instruction, that is, discipline?
 - A. Because the law requires forty lashes
 - B. Because teachers must be paid
 - C. Because human beings are wayward like a loose toddler, and the wandering must be reined in for skill to form
 - D. Because wisdom is inherited, not learned

4. What does Proverbs 1:5 abolish?
 - A. The distinction of naive and youth
 - B. The need for a human teacher
 - C. The father's role in instruction
 - D. Graduation: the wise man will hear and increase in learning, never arriving
5. What does beginning mean in the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge?
 - A. Foundation and prerequisite: no progress in wisdom without submission to Yahweh
 - B. The first lesson of childhood, later outgrown
 - C. The easiest of wisdom's stages
 - D. The chronological start of Israel's schools
6. What distinguishes Folly's banquet from Wisdom's in chapter 9?
 - A. Folly's feast is costly; Wisdom's is free
 - B. Folly whispers of stolen water and secret bread, and her guests are in the depths of Sheol; Wisdom calls openly to life
 - C. Folly invites the wise; Wisdom the simple
 - D. Folly's house has seven pillars
7. What does position A claim about the arrangement of chapters 10 to 29?
 - A. The order is strictly chronological
 - B. The order follows the Hebrew alphabet
 - C. The proverbs come deliberately at random, the reader supplying the connections as part of the training
 - D. The order was lost in transmission
8. What does Proverbs 16:1 to 9 demonstrate for the majority position?
 - A. That chapter 16 begins a new author's work
 - B. That the Septuagint reordered the book
 - C. That comparisons dominate after chapter 15
 - D. A smaller ordered unit: nine proverbs on the Lord's governance of human plans, framed by an inclusio
9. How do most people in the pew read a proverb like 22:6?
 - A. As an inflexible, absolute promise, claimed as a guarantee for wayward children
 - B. As a purely historical observation
 - C. As addressed only to kings
 - D. As a riddle without practical force
10. Why does Essex prefer slice of reality to expression of general truth?
 - A. Because the Hebrew word for proverb means slice
 - B. If a proverb were merely generally true it would sometimes be error; rather each is true as far as it goes, awaiting the balance of the other slices
 - C. Because general truths cannot be preached
 - D. Because Hildebrandt's view is the oldest

11. What do Proverbs 26:4 and 5 require of the wise man?
 - A. To answer fools only in private
 - B. To memorize both and quote the shorter
 - C. Discernment of the moment: both are true, and wisdom knows when to answer a fool and when not to
 - D. To let elders answer fools
12. Where does the chief modern misuse of Proverbs arise, per Essex?
 - A. From cults building doctrine on the riddles
 - B. From translators smoothing the Hebrew
 - C. From preachers avoiding the book entirely
 - D. From sincere lovers of Proverbs and counselors who absolutize single proverbs without the balancing slices
13. How should the sentence proverbs generally be preached?
 - A. Topically, gathering the slices on speech, work, discipline, and the like, as Mayhue's book models
 - B. Verse by verse from 10:1 to 29:27
 - C. Only alongside their Egyptian parallels
 - D. Exclusively to adult congregations
14. Why is Proverbs 8:22 to 31 not a direct messianic prophecy?
 - A. Because wisdom there is created, not begotten
 - B. The speaker is the book's personified Lady Wisdom commending her God-given origin, not a prediction in the manner of Isaiah 7:14
 - C. Because the passage is a late addition
 - D. Because the New Testament never alludes to it
15. How does Garrett settle the identity of the woman of Proverbs 31?
 - A. She is Lady Wisdom in final form
 - B. She is Lemuel's own mother
 - C. The book addresses a son whose most practical wisdom-decision is his wife: this is the portrait of the woman to seek
 - D. She is a composite of Israel's queens
16. What does the canonical seam from Proverbs into Ruth confirm?
 - A. That Ruth was written by Solomon
 - B. That the acrostic was originally Ruth's epilogue
 - C. That the Megilloth predate Proverbs
 - D. That the excellent wife is no unattainable ideal: Boaz calls Ruth a woman of excellence, the phrase's one other use
17. What does the title Song of Songs mean?
 - A. A superlative, like King of kings: the best of songs, the greatest of Solomon's thousand and five
 - B. A song in multiple movements
 - C. The first song of the Psalter's fifth book
 - D. A duet, literally a song of two songs

18. How did the historic majority resolve the problem of Solomon's authorship?
 - A. By denying Solomon wrote it
 - B. By allegorizing: the Song as God's love for Israel or Christ's love for the church, removing the human love
 - C. By assigning it to Solomon's youth
 - D. By treating it as translated Egyptian poetry
19. What textual feature most troubles the allegorical reading?
 - A. The absence of God's name from the Song
 - B. The mention of Tirzah beside Jerusalem
 - C. The majority of the Song's words are the woman's, and she takes the initiative from the first line
 - D. The Song's brevity
20. What is the shepherd hypothesis?
 - A. That the Song was sung by shepherds at Passover
 - B. That the beloved is a figure for David
 - C. That shepherd is a royal title for Solomon
 - D. A three-character reading: Solomon woos a woman who stays true to her shepherd lover, teaching the king a love he cannot buy
21. What should readers know about the speaker labels in modern translations of the Song?
 - A. They are interpretation, absent from the Hebrew: the NASB margins them honestly, while inline labels can mislead readers
 - B. They derive from the oldest manuscripts
 - C. They were fixed by the Masoretes
 - D. They match the Septuagint's stage directions
22. What is the Song's purpose, stated before the interpretive debates?
 - A. To allegorize the exodus covenant
 - B. To celebrate the marital joy experienced by the man and the woman
 - C. To catalog the flora of Israel
 - D. To warn against foreign marriages

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 A · 2 B · 3 C · 4 D · 5 A · 6 B · 7 C · 8 D · 9 A · 10 B · 11 C · 12 D · 13 A · 14 B · 15 C · 16 D · 17 A · 18 B · 19 C · 20 D · 21 A · 22 B

TALK IT OVER

1. Proverbs says the world's two great lies are something for nothing and pleasure without cost, in an age that denies consequences altogether. Where do you hear those two appeals most persuasively pitched today?
2. The fear of the Lord is wisdom's prerequisite: no submission, no progress. Where are you seeking skill, in work, relationships, or ministry, without first submitting that area to God?
3. Essex moved from reading proverbs as promises, to general truths, to slices of a whole. Which proverb have you treated as the whole pie, and which balancing slices does it need?
4. Both feasts of Proverbs 9 invite the same simple passerby. What makes stolen water taste sweet, and what would help you crave the open table instead?

5. The Song gives most of its words to the woman and celebrates married joy without embarrassment. What does it say about God that such a book is Scripture, and what corrections does it offer to both prudishness and the culture's version of love?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

Proverbs 1:7

GO FURTHER

Read Proverbs 1 to 9 in one or two sittings, marking each call to hear and the two banquets of chapter 9, then Proverbs 26:1 to 12 to watch the slices balance each other. Read Proverbs 31:10 to 31 beside Ruth 3, and the Song of Songs chapter 1 noting who speaks. Next session: the interpretation of the Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes.