Synopsis of the Books of the Bible

Proverbs

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882)

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Introduction

The scope and purpose of the book

The Book of Proverbs gives us the application of that wisdom which created the heavens and the earth to the details of life in this world of confusion and evil. This thought brings out the immensity of grace unfolded here. God deigns to apply His wisdom to the circumstances of our practical life, and to shew us, with His own intelligence, the consequences of all the ways in which man may walk. For it is often in the way of knowledge, not of precept, that the statements made in the Book of Proverbs are presented. It is a great blessing to be provided for in the labyrinth of this world, in which a false step may lead to such bitter consequences, with a book that sets forth the path of prudence and of life; and that in connection with a wisdom which comes from God.

Heavenly wisdom exercised in, and applied to, this world

It is well to remember that the Book of Proverbs treats of this world, and of God's government, according to which man reaps that which he has sown. This is always true, whatever may be the sovereign grace that bestows on us things beyond and infinitely above this world.

Solomon was filled with wisdom from above, but which had its exercise in this world, and its application to it; that is to say, which applied to it God's way of viewing all things, discerning the truth of all that, day by day, is developed in it. We have here the ways of God, the divine path of human conduct, the discernment of that which the heart of man produces, and of its consequences; and also — for one who is subject to the word — the means of avoiding the path of his own will and of his own foolish heart (which is unable to understand the bearing of a multitude of actions that it suggests to him), and this, not by bringing him back to moral perfection — for that is not the object of the Proverbs; but to that wisdom and prudence which enable him to avoid many errors, and to maintain a serious walk before God, and an habitual submission to His mind. The precepts of this book establish practical happiness in this world by maintaining earthly relationships in their integrity according to God. Now it is not human prudence and sagacity that are enjoined. The fear of the Lord,* which is the beginning of wisdom, is the subject here. {* I have left "Lord" here as an expression of general application, but Jehovah is always His name in Israel, and that of government, save in a few cases where Adonai (Lord, in the proper appellative use of it) is employed. But it is to be noted that Jehovah is used in Proverbs, because it is authoritatively instructive in known relationship; never in Ecclesiastes, where it is God in contrast with man, having his own experience as such on earth. "God" abstractedly is only once used in Proverbs (Prov. 25:2). We have "her God" in Prov. 2:17.

Chapters 1 to 9

The distinct parts of the book

There are two very distinct parts in this book. The first nine chapters, which give the great general principles; and the proverbs, properly so called, or moral aphorisms or sentences, which indicate the path in which the wise man should walk. At the end of the book is a collection of such made by Hezekiah.

The fear of the Lord: the madness of self-will

Let us examine the first part. The grand principle is laid down at the outset — the fear of the Lord on the one side, and on the other the madness of self-will, which despises the wisdom and instruction that restrain it. For, besides the knowledge of good and evil in respect of which the fear of the Lord will operate, there is that exercise of authority in God's created order which is a check on will (the origin of all disorder), as that confided to parents and the like. And these are carefully insisted on, in contrast with independence, as the basis of happiness and moral order in the world. It is not simply God's authority giving precepts, nor even His statements of the consequence of actions, but the order He has set up in the relationships He has established amongst men, especially of parents, subjection to them is really owning God in His order. It is the first commandment with promise.

Man's will manifested in violence and corruption

There are two forms in which sin, or the activity of man's will, manifests itself — violence and corruption. This was seen at the time of the deluge. The earth was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. Satan is a liar and murderer. In man, corrupt lusts are even a more abundant source of evil.

In Proverbs 1 violence is pointed out as the infringement of those obligations which the will of God has laid upon us. But wisdom cries aloud that her voice may be heard, proclaiming the judgment of those who despise her ways.

The way of deliverance

Proverbs 2 gives us the result of subjection of heart to the words of wisdom, and an earnest search after it — the knowledge of the fear of Jehovah, and the knowledge of God Himself. He who applies himself to this shall be kept: he shall not only have no part with the wicked man, but he shall be delivered from the deceitful woman — from corruption. The judgment of the earth and the prosperity of the righteous are declared.

The clue to guidance through a world of wickedness

The latter principle being established, Proverbs 3 shews that it is not human sagacity or the prudence of man which imparts the wisdom here spoken of. Neither is it the ardent desire after prosperity and happiness, manifesting itself in crooked ways; but the fear of Jehovah and subjection to His word supply the one clue to guide us safely through a world of wickedness which He governs.

The necessity of pursuing wisdom: warning

Proverbs 4 insists on the necessity of pursuing wisdom at whatever cost; it is a path of sure reward. It warns against all association that would lead the contrary way and into ruin, adding that the heart, the lips, and the feet are to be watched.

Corruption of heart seen by Jehovah

Proverbs 5 returns in detail to the corruption of heart that leads a man to forsake the wife of his youth for another. This path demoralises the whole man. But the eyes of Jehovah are upon the ways of man.

The principles of life: hearkening to wisdom's words

In Proverbs 6 wisdom will not be surety for another. It is neither slothful, nor violent, nor deceitful. The strange woman should be avoided as fire: there is no reparation for adultery. In Proverbs 7 the house of the strange woman is the path to the grave. To curb oneself, to be firm in resisting allurements, looking to Jehovah and hearkening to the words of the wise — such are the principles of life given in these chapters.

The everlasting wisdom of God, active, revealed and unfolded

Proverbs 8. The wisdom of God is active. It cries aloud; it invites men. Three principles distinguish it — discretion, or the right consideration of circumstances, instead of following self-will; hatred of evil, which evidences the fear of Jehovah; and detestation of arrogance and hypocrisy in man. It is by wisdom that kings and princes rule; strength, counsel, and sound wisdom, and durable riches, are found in it. Moreover Jehovah Himself has acted according to His own perfect discernment of the right relations of all things to each other; that is to say, He created them according to the perfection of His own thoughts. But this leads us farther; for Christ is the wisdom of God. He is the centre of all relations, according to the perfections of God; and is in Himself the object of God's eternal delight. The everlasting wisdom of God is revealed and unfolded in Him. But this is not the only link. If Christ was the object of God the Father's delight, as the centre and fulness of all wisdom, men have been the delight of Christ, and the habitable parts of Jehovah's earth. It is in connection with men that Christ is seen, when considered as uniting and developing in Himself every feature of the wisdom and the counsels of God. The life that was in Him was the light of men. Christ is then the object of God the Father's delight. Christ ever found His joy in God the Father, and His delight with the sons of men,* and in the earth inhabited by men. Here then must this wisdom be displayed. Here must the perfection of God's ways be manifested. Here must divine wisdom be a guide to the conduct of a being subject to its direction. Now it is in Christ, the wisdom of God, that this is found. Whoso hearkens to Him finds life. Observe here that, all-important as this revelation is of the display of God's wisdom in connection with men, we do not find man's new place in Christ, nor the assembly here. She is called away from this present evil age to belong to Jesus in heaven. Christ cannot actually yet rejoice in the sons of men, if we take their state into account. When He takes possession of the earth, this will be fully accomplished —

this will be the millennium. Meantime He calls on men to hear His voice. The principle of a path to be followed by hearkening to the words of wisdom is one of the greatest importance for this world, and of the most extensive bearing. There is the path of God, in which He is known. There is but one. If we do not walk in it, we shall suffer the consequences, even if really loving the Lord. {* So He became a man, and the unjealous testimony of the angels on His birth is, glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good pleasure in men. Man would not have Him, and the special relationship of His risen place as man with God, "my Father and your Father, my God and your God," and that of the assembly was formed, but His delight was in that race; for the time it was not peace on earth but division, but even after the millennium the tabernacle of God will be with men, where we have both the special relationship and the general blessing.}

Wisdom's invitation

But in fact (Proverbs 9) wisdom has done more than this; it has formed a system, established a house of its own, upheld by the perfection of well-regulated and co-ordinate solidity. It is furnished with meat and wine; the table is spread; and, in the most public manner, wisdom invites the simple to come and partake, while pointing out to them the right way in which life is found. There is another woman; but before speaking of her, the Spirit teaches that instruction is wasted on the scorner; he will but hate his reprover. Wisdom is wise even in relation to its enemies. There is progress for the wise and the upright, but the beginning of it is the fear of Jehovah. This is its fundamental principle.

Warning against the folly of sin

But scoffing is not the only character of evil. There is the foolish woman. This is not the activity of love which seeks the good of those who are ignorant of good. She is clamorous, sitting in the high places, at the door of her house, seeking to turn aside those who go right on their ways, and alluring those that have no understanding into the paths of deceit and sin; and they know not that her guests are the victims of death. Such are the general instructions which God's warning wisdom gives us.

Chapters 10 to 31

Snares to be avoided, the path to be followed

In Proverbs 10 begin the details which teach those who give ear how to avoid the snares into which the simple might fall, the path to be followed in many cases, and the consequences of men's actions: in short, that which characterises wisdom in detail, what may be prudence for man, divine discretion for the children of God; and also, the result of God's government, whatever appearances may be for awhile. It is well to observe, that there is no question of redemption or propitiation in this book; it proposes a walk according to the wisdom of God's government.

Wisdom for government: industry and its reward

In the final chapter (Prov. 31) we have the character of a king according to wisdom, and that of the woman in her own house — the king who does not allow himself that which, by darkening his moral discernment through the indulgence of his lusts, would make him unfit to govern. In the woman we see the persevering and devoted industry which fills the house with riches, brings honour to its inhabitants, and removes all the cares and anxieties produced by sloth. The typical application of these two specific characters is too evident to need explanation. The example of the woman is very useful, as to the spirit of the thing, to one who labours in the assembly.

The great use of the book to the Christian

Although in this book the wisdom produced by the fear of Jehovah is only applied to this world, it is on that very account of great use to the Christian, who, in view of his heavenly privileges, might, more or less, forget the continual government of God. It is very important for the Christian to remember the fear of the Lord, and the effect of God's presence on the details of his conduct; and I repeat that which I said at the beginning, that it is great grace which deigns to apply divine wisdom to all the details of the life of man in the midst of the confusion brought in by sin. Occupied with heavenly things, the Christian is less in the way of discovering, by his own experience, the clue to the labyrinth of evil through which he is passing. God has considered this, and He has laid down this first principle, "wise unto that which is good, and simple concerning evil." Thus the Christian may be ignorant of evil (if a worldling were so, he would fall into it), and yet avoid it through his knowledge of good. The wisdom of God gives him the latter; the government of God provides for all the rest. Now, in the Proverbs, we have these things in principle and in detail. I have not dwelt on the figurative character of the forms of evil. They are rather principles than figures. But the violent man of the last days is continually found in the Psalms; and Babylon is the full accomplishment of the woman who takes the simple in her snares and leads them down to death; just as Christ is the perfect wisdom of God which leads to life. But these two things which manifest evil proceed from the heart of man at all times since the fall: only we have seen that there is an active development of the wiles of the evil woman, who has her own house and her own arrangements. It is not simply the principle of corruption, but an organised system, as is that of sovereign wisdom.