

Proverbs 1: 1-19

The first seven verses serve as a preface to the book as a whole. Here we are introduced to the intended audience and its major theme.

It has a particular concern for the young. (4b) Think of Daniel and his 3 friends as those who have been raised on the wisdom of Proverbs. Or the young girl from Israel abducted from her family and serving in the household of Naaman. (2 Kings 5:2,3). It is broad in its scope speaking to the simple (4a) (NIV footnote: the gullible, without moral direction and inclined to evil) and the wise. (5a). In other words this has something to say to us all.

The 31 chapters are to do with behaviour, (3) but the behaviour concerns everyday things, the little choices that our lives are made up of.

Proverbs can be summed up as an urgent appeal to gain wisdom. This wisdom calls for a right attitude to God. *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.* (7) We are to live our lives deeply impressed by the grace of God that has entered into covenant relationship with us. It ought to humble our pride and promote submission to his will.

There are 2 paths we can pursue through life. We can either embrace folly or pursue wisdom. The second half of the section (9-19) illustrates the danger that lurks around us. The invitation looks exciting and profitable. The cost though is disclosed in the final verse. (19) By contrast wisdom is located in the instruction of godly parents. It may appear unspectacular and restrictive. It is though, life saving.

- Jesus commended the Queen of Sheba (the South) for making the effort to travel from Yemen to Jerusalem to listen to the wisdom of Solomon. (Luke 11:31) Would he commend our efforts to engage with Solomon's book?
- Our homes are to be places of instruction, where clear direction and loving encouragement is given.
- Wisdom is first and foremost a product of my relationship with God. Am I learning the healthy, constructive, life giving fear of the Lord?

Proverbs 1: 20-33

It would be easy to think wisdom is some kind of special knowledge required by people who have to do a lot of thinking. Proverbs envisages someone we could call Lady Wisdom making an announcement but she does not confine her invitation to the classroom or the debating chamber. We find 'her' out in the open, in the public square, on top of the city walls and making her pitch by the city gate. (20,21) She wants everyone to hear this.

The essence of her message is: Repent at my rebuke! (23) The 'simple' are to realise their lives lack moral direction; the mockers are to refocus their behaviour on themselves and the 'fools' to consider who they really are. (22) Wisdom is teaching us how to relate to the Lord. There are no shortage of voices offering advice on how to do just that. Proverbs makes ending our resistance to Gods rule our first priority.

The rest of the section (24-32) sets out in uncompromising terms the consequences of not heeding wisdom's invitation. *Then they will call to me but I will not answer; they will look for me but will not find me.* (28) Is this simply harsh OT religion?

Both John the Baptist and Jesus began their ministries with the call to repent. (Matt 3:2 & 4:17)

Jesus likened the people of his day to children who were never happy with what they received. (Matt 11:17,18) and he denounced the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed because ... *'they did not repent.'* (Matt 11:20)

In his parables he made clear that familiarity with his teaching and proximity to his activity did not constitute salvation. *Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir open the door for us' But he will answer 'I don't know you or where you come from.' Then you will say, 'we ate and drank with you and you taught in our streets' But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evil doers!'* (Luke 13:25-27)

- Repent at my rebuke! What areas of your life is God challenging you about just now?

Proverbs 2: 1-8

Sometimes wisdom is presented as an invitation to be accepted (1:20,21) and sometimes as something to be sought. These verses explain what it means to search for wisdom.

It means to relate correctly to Gods commands. (1) They are not an unreasonable burden to be avoided. (the Pharisees approach Matt 23:23) The psalmist announces: *The commands of the Lord are radiant giving light to the eyes.* (Psalm 19:8b)

It means revealing a confidence in Gods generosity and goodness as we go to him for insight and understanding (3). James reminds us of Gods readiness to provide wisdom to those who ask. *If any of you lacks wisdom you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault. But when you ask you must believe and not doubt...* (James 1:5,6)

It means pursuing wisdom as others pursue wealth. (4) There are echoes here of Solomon's request for wisdom when confronted with God's invitation. (1 Kings 3:5) God's pleasure in the King is seen in his comment: *Since you have asked for this and for not long life and wealth for yourself I will do what you have asked.* (1 Kings 3:11,12)

Those who live applying Gods wisdom to their lives find God's blessing and protection attending their way. (6-8)

- Choice is the character of 21st century life. Are we making wisdom our priority whatever else may be on offer?
- *For the Lord gives wisdom and from his mouth comes knowledge and understanding.* How carefully are we listening to what he has to say?
- The outcome of wisdom is moral rather than intellectual. Are we committed to being among the *upright (7a) the blameless (7b) the just (8a) and the faithful ones (8b)*

Proverbs 2:9-22.

Jesus spoke of life in terms of two paths and two gates. He describes the path that leads to life as 'narrow' and indicates many find it unattractive. Proverbs not only teaches us about this path but creates appetite to be pursuing it. *Then you will understand what is right and just and fair - every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. (9,10)*

Proverbs is a practical book. It seeks to make us 'streetwise'. *Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men... (12)* Who will we listen to, admire, associate with are among the most important questions we face. But not only is life complicated evil is not always self evident. False teachers maybe wolves at heart but they appear in 'sheep's clothing'. Satan has the ability to present himself as an angel of light. Those who are perverse have an ability to make evil look good and good, evil. Gods wisdom arms us with discretion and supplies us with understanding. (11)

Solomon's son Rehoboam would have done well to heed his father's teaching. His failure to identify 'the young men' (1 Kings 12:8-11) as wicked, cost him dearly. Perhaps though for us the threat comes less from those we meet in our day to day lives and more from those who we encounter through the virtual world of internet and television.

Proverbs moves from the perverse words of the wicked to the seductive words of the adulteress (16-19) It is a reminder that one of the major themes of Proverbs is 'young people'. Seductive words find their power in their ability to connect with our sinful hearts. They seem to promise to give us what we really want. Its why what is on offer here is more than information. *V10 For wisdom will enter your heart.* This book understands me. It appreciates the real issues are settled below the surface where desire and longing are formed. Wisdom will not only give us an understanding of what is right and just and fair (9) it will create a delight in doing those things. (10)

- Check your bearings. *V20 Thus you will walk in the ways of the good and keep to the paths of the righteous.*
- Proverbs is preoccupied with destination. *Surely her house leads down to death.* Jesus reminds us that it's the narrow road that leads to life. Can we keep the matter of arriving at the correct destination before ourselves and our families?

Proverbs 3: 1-12

Solomon sets out some of elements that go to make up a wise life. Its worth stating that wisdom is not simply common sense. We are encouraged to be suspicious of our own unaided insights:

- Lean not on your own understanding (5b)
- Do not be wise in your own eyes (7)

It is someone else's teaching that we need to be deferring to. *My son do not forget my teaching but keep my commands in your heart. (1)* It this instruction that will impress upon us the crucial importance of always been shaped by *love and faithfulness. (3)*

Note the connection between fearing the Lord and shunning evil. A preoccupation with and a love for God and his ways creates within us a progressive dissatisfaction with the views and the priorities of this world. This is the antidote to being wise in your own eyes. (7,8)

Trust in the Lord, fear the Lord and honour the Lord are always ways of saying similar things. Each though has its own application. Our concern is we only *honour God with our lips while our hearts are far from him(Isaiah 29:13)*. Two things provide the true index to our hearts. One is our prayers and the other our giving. *Honour the Lord with your wealth with the firstfruits of all your crops. (9)*

Gods activity in our lives is not confined to our successes. Proverbs speaks of Gods discipline (11,12) Hebrews quotes these verses and adds '*treat hardship as discipline, God is treating you as children.*' (Hebrews 12:7) When tough things are intruding into my life its worth asking what my loving Heavenly Father is aiming to accomplish through such circumstances.

- Are love and faithfulness constant features of our behaviour?
- Trusting God involves questioning our own judgment. Do we seek God in prayer over the little daily issues as well as the big decisions of our lives?
- Do you need to audit how effectively you are honouring God with your wealth?

Proverbs 3: 13-35

We like things that are quick and easy. Wisdom is anything but. The previous section calls into question our judgment, it challenges us over how we use our money and it reminds us that sometimes God's ways are painful. It is no surprise therefore that the next section begins by emphasising the value of gaining wisdom.

She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed. (18)

Proverbs picks up themes from Eden (the tree of life) and Genesis 1 (v19,20). Wisdom is central to the work of creation and the life that he intended for men and women. God is a life giver and wisdom stands behind all his ways. We are invited to see its value (13-18) and to appreciate the wise planning and ordering at the heart of creation. (19,20). It follows that to reject Gods wisdom, and instead to *lean on our own understanding (5)*, is to invite chaos and disintegration.

We don't live in the perfect world of Eden. Our situation includes accidents, opposition and disaster. In v21-26 we are shown that wisdom enables us to live in a fallen world safely and confidently. *Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the Lord will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared.* (25,26)

The tree of life image is used a number of times throughout Proverbs (11:30, 13:12, 15:4) In these subsequent references it pictures the believer as a source of life for others. V27-35 contain that emphasis. The wise person knows what he owes others. Loving your neighbour is set out here as 5 things you are not to do to them (27-31) Our job is to do others good no matter who they are and to leave God to do the judging. (33,34)

- As our society increasingly rejects Gods order chaos and disintegration become more evident. Pray for our land and those who shape our values.
- Reaffirm your confidence in Gods wisdom as sufficient for life in a fallen world. If you have let 'wisdom out your sight' (21) make the changes necessary to re-locate it at the centre.
- Thank God for Jesus *in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3)*

Proverbs 4: 1-9

Proverbs can feel repetitive. Chapter after chapter impresses the same message: Get wisdom. We should though also feel the passion with which this is done.

We listen as a father instructs his boys on this issue. Ours is a day that urges our children to study hard or to invest in sporting opportunities. We may show a keen interest in who they choose as their friends but this father intentionally and urgently impresses the priority of wisdom on his family.

The passage contains a picture of continuity. His father has taught him these things and now he is passing them onto his children. (1-4) We do well to remember how difficult it is to believe in God. The significant people in our culture view the Christian worldview as primitive superstition. The idea of needing someone to save you from your sins is incomprehensible to 21st century secular Britain. But some people have a huge advantage. To be exposed to Bible truth from your earliest years, to be taught the scriptures and prayed over is a most wonderful gift. It is never too soon to start! (3,4)

Wisdom is spoken of in feminine personal terms. *Do not forsake wisdom and she will protect you Cherish her and she will exalt you; embrace her and she will honour you.* (6,8) The Bible encourages me to treat wisdom like a much loved family friend. Their company is valued, their opinion welcomed, their warnings heeded, their instructions followed. So it is to be with Gods wisdom.

- *The beginning of wisdom is this: get wisdom.* (7) Appreciating how important it is to acquire wisdom is the start of the process. Have we started?
- If appropriate, do we need to raise the place of wisdom on our family agenda?
- Is there any way we could be described as cherishing and embracing God's wisdom?

Proverbs 4:10-27

Is Proverbs simply offering self evident truth? *Do not set foot on the path of the wicked (14)* but rather “listen to my instruction that will *lead you along straight paths.*” (11) The Bible is not content with superficial righteousness. Jesus warned, *Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. (Matt 6:1)*

Proverbs understands the ‘command and control centre’ of our lives. *Above all else guard your heart for everything else you do flows from it.* Jesus put his finger on just this area when he diagnosed our condition. We are not defiled by the wrong food going into us but rather by those desires and attitudes that emerge from the depths of our lives. (Mark 7:20-23) When David expressed his repentance to God in Psalm 51 he revealed he understood the real issue: *Create in me a pure heart, O God (Psalm 51:10)*

From this ‘well’ comes our thoughts, our words and our actions. If we guard our hearts we will be enabled *to keep our mouths free of perversity (24).* According to James the tongue can operate like a rudder. Angry words, deceitful words, harsh words all affect other people and in turn impact on the direction of our lives.

Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways. (26). As far as the bible is concerned your mind is in your heart. Guarding our hearts means we will not simply allow ourselves to unthinkingly go with the flow. We will give thought to our ways and carefully hold onto the father’s instructions. (13)

- Whose voice is allowed to shape what is going on in our hearts?
- The psalmist prayed: *Set a guard over my mouth, Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips (Psalm 141:3)* Should we pray this for ourselves?
- Would you describe yourself as being ‘under instruction’ in any way?

Proverbs 5:1-23

Proverbs sees life in terms of two paths. To change the picture slightly it presents it as the invitation of two women. On the one hand Lady Wisdom invites us to learn from her. The alternative is the ‘adulterous woman’ and her sensual invitation. Because these are ‘themes’ through the book we need to guard against thinking that adultery is always the result of a devious woman and a feckless man. The roles maybe reversed and the warning is for all of us.

Things are not always as they seem. Those ‘honey filled lips’ turn out to be sharp as a double edged sword. But notice Proverbs doesn’t offer any system to discern what might lie behind the words. Rather it says: *do not go near the door of her house.* Genesis describes the advances of Potiphar’s wife towards Joseph. His response: *he refused to go to bed with her or even to be with her. (Gen 39:10)*

Proverbs emphasises the importance of discipline. Discipline is usually unpleasant. It maybe painful and it will certainly bring unwelcome restraint on my life. But children raised without discipline do not do well and neither do Gods children that are left to their own devices. (11-14)

V15-20 present the alternative. Here is an attractive enduring marriage. It presents a positive picture of sexual relations but it is a discreet one, a gift exclusive to a marriage partner alone. *Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers.* In our culture the talking, educating, televising, posting of sexual behaviour serves to remove it from that private context and make it something commonplace and widely available.

As is frequently the case the Bible is interested in destination. Who we become involved with and what is driving our lives contributes significantly to where we end up. Proverbs warns that adultery leads in the direction of the grave. (5 & 22,23)

- Pray for those who are single and feel the pressure of sexual temptation. Pray for those whose lives have been marred by sexual failure. Pray for their restoration.
- Pray for young people growing up in our sex obsessed culture. Pray for homes to be places of loving instruction and the church family to set an attractive alternative vision.
- Pray for us all to recognise our need of discipline and *'not to make light of the Lord's discipline and not lose heart when he rebukes you'* (Heb 12:5b6)

Proverbs 6:1-19

Proverbs offers us principles rather than commands. Situations are to be weighed carefully and the principle applied with skill. (See 26:4,5 where two apparently contradictory statements are made. The situation we find ourselves in is to determine how we act)

This passage warns us against putting up security for someone else. (ie promising to pay his debt if he defaults) There maybe occasions when this is the right thing to do but generally it is to be avoided. In the first phrase the word 'neighbour' is used but then it reverts to stranger. Later we read: *Whoever puts up security for a stranger will surely suffer, but whoever refuses to shake hands in a pledge is safe.* (11:15) To enter into a pledge on behalf of a stranger is to become 'trapped'. The guarantor is at the mercy of the debtor who no longer has any stake in satisfying the debt.

The passage addresses the situation where someone has become ensnared through making a rash promise. So what is he to do? The Bible sees the situation in terms of prey caught in a trap. (2) The word 'wait' is a favourite of the Bible writers. This though is not a situation for delay.

An example to heed. *Go to the ant, you sluggard.* The ant is commended because it acts without a leader. In other words it's a creature that takes initiative. The 'son' is to shun all thoughts of rest or sleep. He is to do whatever it takes to release himself from this contract. (4,5)

By contrast the sluggard responds to the call to take action with the reply, 'Soon'. There is nothing decisive about the behaviour of the sluggard. He doesn't reject the advice or refuse to go and sort things out. He may agree that he needs to do something about the situation but just not right now.

But before he gets around to it the bailiffs have arrived to recover the debt and he finds himself ruined. (11)

- Are there situations or people we have become involved in that we need to extricate ourselves from?
- Are there things we are putting off which the Bible is challenging us to do something about?
- Are we inclined to make rash promises that leave us vulnerable?

Proverbs 6:20-35

All sin but particularly sexual sin seems so enticing and alluring. It promises to be life giving, liberating pleasure with no cost attached. In contrast God's ways seem so oppressive and restrictive. Surely light and life are to be found when we step off God's path rather than staying on God's path (v23)?

Proverbs shows us that the allure of sexual sin is nothing new. It has always promised freedom and pleasure without consequences and like the son we need to see how damaging it is and how good God's ways really are for us.

The parents want their son to realise that leaving God's path isn't just sinful, it's also folly. It's not just sinful it's senseless (v32.) It is not just sin against God, it's sin against ourselves. Sin is so tempting because it tells us that there won't be any consequences but this is a lie. Sexual immorality is playing with fire (v26-27) and will bring inevitable destruction (v32) and shame (v33). It promises to be free but it really comes at a great price (v26). It tells us that we won't be found out, but ultimately our sin will find us out and be exposed (v29, v35.)

Only God's wise word, written deep on our hearts can protect us from such folly (v20-21.) As we hear God's word and walk in his ways we will actually find the freedom, light and life that we long for (v23-24.) It's as we walk in God's ways that begin to see how true and life-giving his ways really are (John 7:17.) It's as we walk in God's ways that we taste and see that God is good (Psalm 34:8.)

- 'Do not lust in your heart after her beauty...' Where is sin at it's most alluring and deceitful for you right now? In what ways are you believing the lie that says that sin won't come with consequences?
- 'Bind them always on your heart... for this command is a lamp... keeping you from your neighbours wife...' It's only as God's word is written on our hearts that we can see sin as it really is - deceitful and disappointing. Choose a verse from this passage that you are going to memorise and meditate upon today to help you.
- Praise God for Jesus who took our blows, disgrace and shame as he was punished for our sin.

Proverbs 7:1-27

Today's passage continues the theme of sexual immorality from yesterday. This passage shows us that the battle against temptation is a battle of words. Will we believe God's true word and store it in our hearts (7:1-5) or will we believe sin's deceptive lies (7:14-21.)

The Father continues to implore his Son to take God's word to heart (v1-5.) If we are going to fight against temptation then we need God's word in our hearts. We need to be memorising and meditating upon God's word because it's only God's good word that will keep us safe and give us life (v2, 5).

To help his Son see how deceitful and dangerous sin is, the Father tells him of the fate of one naive young man (v6-27.) Of all the simple young men, this guy was particularly senseless (v7.) He was in the wrong part of town at the wrong time of day and he was heading in the wrong direction (v8-9.) Here is someone flirting with sin rather fleeing from it, and the consequences are disastrous.

He meets a woman dressed like a prostitute but it's her words rather than her appearance that are so dangerous (v14-21.) She's crafty and deceitful, she promises good wholesome fun with no consequences but all she brings is death (v22-27.)

- Beware the deceitfulness of sin - Sin always promises life but always brings death. Where do you find sin to be most appealing?
- Don't flirt with sin - As God's people we're to flee sexual immorality. Unlike this foolish young man we need to be honest about our weaknesses and flee sexual sin. Are you particularly prone to temptation at certain times or in certain places? What can you do to make sure that you are not in the wrong place at the wrong time?
- Keep my commands and you will live - Our only hope against temptation is if we're actively storing God's word in our hearts (not just our heads.) What truth from this passage are you going to meditate on as you go about your day?

Proverbs 8:1-21

We often think that God and his wisdom are elusive. We think that God is hiding and that it is a struggle for us to find the wise way to live. Yet here in Proverbs 8 we see that Lady Wisdom is not hiding away in a dark corner of the city. She calls out and raises her voice (v1), she stands at the crossroads at the highest point of the city (v2). She's at the busy gate shouting out to anyone who will listen (v3-4.) God and his ways are not hard to find. They are freely available. God's wisdom calls out to all (v4). The question is not whether we can find God's wisdom the question is whether we will listen to God's wisdom (v6)? Will we set our hearts on what he has to say (v5)? Will we choose wisdom above all else today (v10)?

This passage shows us why God's wisdom really is worth embracing; it give prudence (v5), it's right (v6), true (v7 and 9), just (v8) and so they are more precious than any other treasure (v11, v18-21.) What may be surprising that this wisdom is at heart about fearing the LORD (v13). It isn't so much about techniques and tactics to use to navigate life,

instead it is about our fundamental attitude and direction each day as we seek to honour and revere God in each decision day by day.

- God's wisdom isn't hidden and secretive, it is freely available - Praise God that he doesn't hide from us but instead reveals himself to us. Praise God for his final revelation in his Son, the Lord Jesus.
- God's wisdom is in your hands. It is calling out to you, will you listen? Will you choose God's instruction above everything else today? What decisions will you face today? What situations will you find yourself in? What will it mean for you to choose God's way today?
- "By me kings reign and rulers issue decrees that are just..." (v15) - Pray for our leaders and rulers to choose God's wisdom. Pray that all our elected officials would fear the Lord, turning from evil and doing what is right. Pray that they and we may know the blessing that comes from living God's way.

Proverbs 8:22-36

Throughout Proverbs 1-9 we need to remember that this is poetic and figurative rather than literal. When woman wisdom speaks of existing before creation she is using poetic imagery to reflect the uniquely close relationship that exists between wisdom and God. God made the universe with order and life is lived best when we discover that order and live in line with it. In that sense life is like a piece of wood which has the grain running through it. When we discover the grain and cut with the grain we enjoy life as it is meant to be lived.

Both folly (ch7) and wisdom (ch8) claim to be able to help us enjoy and live life to the full. Only wisdom who can really do this because as the first of God's works she is uniquely placed to give insight and guidance as we seek to navigate God's world and live life with the grain (v22-31.) We live in a world of many competing voices all telling us that they have the secret for our to navigate life. Folly has many different accents today but God's wisdom has by far the best credentials. None of the many voices we hear today can have existed before the creation of the world.

Wisdom has a unique vantage point to speak about life and so we really will be blessed if we listen to her instruction, keep her ways, stick close to her door every day (v32-34.) God's wisdom is the secret to living life with God and enjoying his favour (v35.) This means that to spurn God's wisdom is in effect to self-harm (v36) because as we turn our back on God's wisdom we're turning our back on life!

- God has made a world of order rather than chaos. He has made a universe that we can discover, explore, study and understand. He has also given us his wisdom so that we might live with the grain of his universe. Praise God for the order and goodness of the universe that he has made.
- Every day the different voices of folly tell us that God's wisdom and his ways will harm us but wisdom tells us that 'those who fail to find me harm themselves...' - Who will you believe today?
- Jesus Christ is the wisdom of God personified. He tells us that abundant, eternal life is to know God the Father and God the Son. Will you watch daily at Jesus' door and walk in his ways to know and enjoy life as God meant it to be lived?

Proverbs 9:1-18

This final chapter draws together the themes of Proverbs so far and puts the choice before us; who will you choose? Wisdom or Folly? It does this by presenting us with two hostesses, two invitations and two feasts. Which invitation will we accept? Which house will we enter? Which food will we eat?

Wisdom invites everyone (v3-4) to enter her perfectly rock-solid house of safety (v1) and enjoy the finest food (v5.) But if we are going to accept her invitation it will involve change (v6.) It will mean leaving our simple, sinful, foolish ways and walking in the way of insight.

In contrast folly is unruly and simple (v13.) In that sense she is just like us (see how we are described in v4 and v16.) Part of folly's appeal is that it is so familiar, it's comfortable, it's what we're used to.

Notice too that folly lives right in the centre of the city (v14, in contrast to wisdom who has to send messengers to the centre of the city v3.) Folly has always been at the centre of every human city, culture and society. Folly hasn't moved home in 3000 years.

Folly, like wisdom appeals to the simple but unlike wisdom she only offers ordinary, every day food (v17.) On the face of it you would think that we would choose wisdom's feast every time, but folly's food is stolen and forbidden and that always makes things sweeter and more delicious to our sinful hearts. Another thing that makes folly's feast so appealing is that she doesn't require us to change. Whereas wisdom called us to leave our simple, foolish paths, folly encourages us to continue in our ways. There seems to be no cost to entering folly's house but once we're inside we realise that feasting with folly costs us everything (v18.)

- Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of insight - Where is God calling you to change direction in your lifestyle?
- Do not rebuke mockers or they will hate you; rebuke the wise and they will love you - When God's word rebukes you or teaches you do you love it or hate it? Do you turn from your simple ways or keep going as you were before? Loving God's correction is the mark of wisdom.