

Food For Thought Article: “The Book of Proverbs - Wisdom for Life.”

Introduction: Before we look at the Book of Proverbs, I would like to mention nine things we need to remember when reading and studying the Bible.

Firstly, that God has given us a library of books, not a collection of texts. The word ‘Bible’ comes from the Greek word ‘Biblia’ meaning ‘Books,’ plural. So, we have 39 books in the Old Testament, 27 books in the New Testament, 66 in all.

Secondly, the Bibles that most of us have and use today are not how God gave them to us originally in that none of the people who wrote the books of the Bible divided them up into chapters and verses. The chapter numbers were added by the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, in the 13th century because he was writing a Bible Commentary at the time and needed to reference more specific portions of Scripture. Unfortunately, many of his chapter numbers divide what God wants to be kept together.

The verses weren’t added until the 16th century by a French printer and scholar called Robert Estienne. He was writing a Bible Concordance and needed a way to reference even smaller portions of Scripture – a sentence or two at a time.

So, whereas God gave us a library of books to read, we have turned it into a series of chapters and verses to be referenced. Rather than searching the Scriptures and studying the books of the Bible, we tend to rely on ‘soundbites’ of Scripture.

Thirdly, we should also remember that the Bible contains many kinds of literature (genres) and that they need to be read and understood differently. There is history, poetry, gospels, wisdom, letters, laws, prophecy, parables, proverbs, apocalyptic literature etc. and these came to the writers in different ways such as dreams, visions, research etc. Many books of the bible combine different genres.

Fourthly, all the people who wrote the Bible were Jews (except possibly Luke) so it is important to understand as much as we can about Jewish thought-forms, language, history, culture etc.

Fifthly, the Person of Jesus is key to understanding all the books of the Bible in both Testaments. As Jesus said, ‘ “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.” Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.’ (Lk.24:44&45)

When we read the Bible, do we experience heartburn? Not the painful digestive condition but the wonderful experience of Jesus opening the Scriptures to us!

The two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus with Jesus said to one another, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he [Jesus] talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” (Lk. 24:32)

Sixthly, the Holy Spirit is also needed to understand Scripture. He reveals the meaning to us and gives us spiritual discernment. The unaided human mind cannot understand the things of God; they are hidden to such people and seem to be ‘foolishness’ to them. The ‘spirit of the world’ cannot make any sense of the Bible, but we have the ‘Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us’ (See 1 Cor. 2:6-16)

Seventhly, despite what I said in point two about the dangers of just referencing chapters and verses in the Bible, it is important that we chew and meditate on small portions of Scripture so they become an integral part of our being, our lifestyle, and our spiritual life. It is important that we take truths that God has spoken to us, personalise them, and allow them to transform us. Some examples of verses which I play regularly in my mind: -

“I will not fear, for God has redeemed me; God has summoned me by name; I am his.” (Is. 43:1 personalised)

“God has loved me with an everlasting love; he has drawn me with unfailing kindness.” (Jer. 31:3 personalised)

“It is dangerous for me to be concerned with what others think of me, but if I trust the Lord, I am safe.” (Prov. 29:25 personalised Good News Version)

“I am God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for me to do.” (Eph. 2:10 personalised)

“The Spirit God gave me does not make me timid, but gives me power, love and self-discipline.” (2 Tim. 1:7 personalised)

Eighthly, it is as we obey God’s word that His word is revealed. There is no revelation without obedience.

‘If’ is one of the most important words in the bible. It is a conditional word that Jesus used often. He said, “**If** you love me, you will **obey** what I command. **If** anyone loves me, he will **obey** my teaching. **If** a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit. **If** anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers. **If** you **obey** my commands you will remain in my love. **If** the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.” (All taken from John’s gospel chapters 14 & 15).

Ninthly, in studying Scripture we need to be able to travel back in time and make what is written there real. Then we travel forwards into today and understand how what was written then applies to us now. We travel back to make the Bible real; we travel forwards to make it relevant.

Let me give you an example. The overarching theme of the Old Testament Books 1 & 2 Samuel, is the relationship between God's Sovereign power and the abuse of the human power invested in the rulers and leaders of the people.

In 2 Sam. 11, we read that King David lusted after Bathsheba, had intercourse with her, and she became pregnant. David tried to manipulate that situation so that it would seem she was pregnant by her husband Uriah whom David had ordered to be brought back from the frontline where Uriah was fighting in the army. When that didn't work, David had Uriah killed on the battlefield and took Bathsheba for himself as one of his own wives.

Does this sexual abuse of power ring any bells for us today as we listen to and watch the news about what some Presidents, Prime Ministers, Princes, Priests, Politicians, Teachers, Financiers etc. have got up to?

So, the question is still very relevant: How does God's pure and perfect sovereignty, power and authority interact with the abuse of power and authority invested in and wielded by human rulers and those in authority? This is what we see being worked out in 1 & 2 Samuel (and many other parts of the Bible). And what God was able to do there and then in establishing his will, he still does today in the here and now.

Well, having established these nine key principles in understanding and approaching Scripture generally, we are now ready to look at the Book of Proverbs specifically.

What is the Book of Proverbs?

In the Bibles we use today, Proverbs is one of the five 'wisdom' books together with Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. 'Wisdom' (the noun 'chokmah'), and 'Wise' (the adjective 'chakam'), are the key words in the book.

Although all languages and cultures have their own proverbs and wisdom literature e.g. Sumerian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek, Chinese, Indian etc., the Hebrew word for 'wisdom' has no plural form. 'Wisdoms' is never mentioned, only 'wisdom' singular. It is also a feminine word which may explain why, in Proverbs, 'wisdom' is personified as female.

We could define a Proverb as a short, pithy saying that contains pragmatic, real-world advice about how to live a successful and fulfilling life.

Which of these two sayings do you prefer? “In advance of committing yourself to a particular course of action, consider carefully the pros and cons of the decision you are about to make,” or “Look before you leap”?! They say the same thing, but why use 25 words when you can use 4?!

Sometimes Proverbs seem to contradict each other e.g. “Many hands make light work” and “Too many cooks spoil the broth”! Although seemingly contradictory, both can be true in different contexts. An example of this from the book of Proverbs occurs in chapter 26 verses 4 and 5 which reads “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.”

Proverbs is one of the books in the Bible which tells us, right from the start, **why** it was written i.e. for gaining wisdom, instruction, insight, prudence, understanding, knowledge, discernment, and guidance. It also tells us **who** it is written for i.e. the tutored and the untutored, young and old, rich and poor (See chapter 1 verses 1 to 6). What is there not to like about reading this book? It is for everyone and relevant to everyone.

Proverbs is also a compilation, a collection of sayings from various sources. King Solomon wrote most of them (1:1; 10:1); some of Hezekiah’s men wrote some of them down (25:1); Agur, son of Jakeh, was inspired to write some of them (30:1-33), and King Lemuel also had some words of advice (31:1-9).

It is also important to remember that proverbs are not promises. Proverbs are generally true ~ maxims which normally work out in practice ~ but they are not cast-iron guarantees. Many Christians have been disappointed when they assumed proverbs were promises.

Primarily, the book of Proverbs comprises the words of a parent to his son who is about to go out into the world. ‘My son’ (sometimes ‘My sons’) is repeated 18 times from Proverbs 1:8 to 7:24. In the immediate application, Solomon is the father and Rehoboam is the son who will replace him as King.

However, there is no need to be sexist about this as the book is equally insistent that the son is not to forsake ‘your **mother’s** teaching’ (1:8). The roles of mother and father are of equal importance: “Listen to your **father**, who gave you life,

and do not despise your **mother** when she is old.....May your **father and mother** be glad; may she who gave you birth rejoice (23:22-25)

I remember when I left home, aged 17, my mother and father gave me lots of advice! Aged 18, I was playing Rugby for the town where I was living and working. That season we had a Rugby tour with some games in the beautiful city of Amsterdam. One night we ventured into the infamous 'Red Light' district and some of my teammates suggested I go with a prostitute. I wasn't a Christian then but I knew from my parents' instruction that that would not be the right thing to do, so I resisted the temptation.

If I had known the book of Proverbs, I would have been doubly sure that I had made the right choice!

King Solomon.

Perhaps this is a good place for us to focus for a moment on Solomon who wrote most of Proverbs. Sometimes it is said that he had lots of wisdom for others but not so much for himself! Like most of us, he had his strengths and weaknesses.

Positively, he asked God for a discerning heart to decide between right and wrong in administering justice (1 Kings 3). God heard his prayer and gave him wisdom and very great insight (along with the riches he hadn't asked for). He spoke 3000 proverbs, composed 1005 songs and, in terms of the natural world, he was the David Attenborough of his day! (1 Kings 4:29-34).

In accordance with God's will, he built and dedicated the magnificent temple in Jerusalem and, during most of his reign, the Kingdom of Israel reached its highest point. People came from the surrounding nations not only to listen to Solomon but also to marvel at the opulence and organisation of his Kingdom, and they worshipped the God of Israel as a result. The Queen of Sheba is the most well-known visitor (1 Kings 10:1-13).

Negatively, it seems that Solomon was harsh with the conscripts he used to build his Palace and the Temple ~ a reminder perhaps that opulence is often built on the poverty, toil, and exploitation of others. He also married many foreign women (including Pharaoh's daughter) who led him astray. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines and they 'turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God' (1 Kings 11:1-13). This happened especially towards the end of Solomon's reign.

How important it is that those of us who have been following the Lord for many years continue to follow him into old age and ultimately until we go to be with him.

In the end, God raised up enemies against Solomon and, after he died, the Kingdom of Israel, tragically, was divided into two.

What is the Nature of Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs?

Proverbs quite clearly emphasises that wisdom begins with the 'Fear of the Lord' (9:10). The phrase 'yirat Adonai' does not mean a cringing terror or being afraid of God but of having a Reverential Awe, an awareness of God's Greatness, Power and Majesty, having a Holy Fear of His Supreme Sovereignty.

Having a true fear of the Lord releases to us many of God's promises and gifts. Isaiah 33:6 says this, "He [the Lord] will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the Lord is the key to this treasure." The 'fear of the Lord' then, unlocks a treasure trove of resources. Alas, it seems that many today may have lost the key.

First in the list of what God requires of his people in Deuteronomy 10:12 is to 'fear the Lord your God.' This is then the motivation for what comes next in the list, 'to walk in obedience to him, to love him and to serve him.'

I hear many sermons today on the love of the Lord, obeying the Lord, the return of the Lord etc., but very few, if any, on the fear of the Lord.

Having a fear of the Lord in no way prevents us from also having him as a friend. Godly fear and friendship can go together; they are not mutually exclusive. Moses feared God and had a friendship relationship with Him. So did Abraham.

And lest we think all this is a bit Old Testament, Paul says, 'Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others' (2 Cor.5:11). Peter instructs disciples to 'live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear' (1 Pet. 1:17), while Jesus positively tells us whom to fear, i.e. God, who has authority to throw us into hell (Lk. 12:5).

Pastorally, I believe that the more we have a healthy fear of God, the more he will set us free from unhealthy fears.

Little wonder then that the book of Proverbs has so much to say about the fear of the Lord in one context or another (See Prov. 1:29; 3:7; 8:13; 10:27; 14:26-27; 15:16; 15:33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17).

The fear of the Lord is where wisdom begins. And as we continue to look at the nature of wisdom in Proverbs, the next question to consider is ~

What are the Areas of Life in which Wisdom is to Operate?

a. Our words.

When I worked in industry as a chemist, I had access to some of the most deadly poisons. One of the most deadly was Potassium Cyanide (KCN). Murderers like it because it looks like sugar, has a faint almondy smell and is easily dissolved in someone's drink. A quarter of a gram is enough to kill.

Imagine how I felt one day when the Lord said to me (from James 3:8), "Your tongue is a restless evil, full of deadly poison!" The previous week I had been sent off the football field for swearing at the referee!

So it was that God began his work of speech sanctification in my life.

How many of us can say, "My mouth speaks what is true, for my lips detest wickedness. All the words of my mouth are just; none of them is crooked or perverse" (Prov. 8:7&8)? James reminds us that an ability to control our tongue is **the** mark of Christian maturity (James 3:2). Lord, have mercy. So, word wisdom means to, "Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips" (Prov. 4:24).

b. Our money and finances.

The first thing to settle here, I believe, is to realise that wisdom is more important, more profitable and yields better returns than our money and finances ever will! Or, to put it proverbially, "Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her" (Prov. 3:13-15).

The second thing is to be reminded that "With me [Wisdom] are riches and honour, enduring wealth and prosperity." "I [Wisdom] bestow a rich inheritance on those who love me and make their treasuries full" (Prov. 8:18-21).

This is one of those proverbs that is generally true in this life but not always. Sometimes we may be in want and at other times in plenty. We may not always experience material prosperity but God will always provide what we need to do his will.

Thirdly, we must be wary of making rash financial decisions and promises which entrap us. This includes putting up security for others and incurring debts which we are then unable to repay (Prov. 6:1-5).

c. Our work life.

Both God and Jesus are ‘workers’ and because we are made in their image and likeness, work is important to us also. We are unlikely to be fulfilled if we have no meaningful work to attend to.

Biblical wisdom includes craftsmanship and creativity. Do you enjoy making garments and embroidery? That is a ‘spiritual’ gift and requires the exercise of wisdom. Do you enjoy working with wood and/or metals? That too is a ‘spiritual’ gift and requires the exercise of wisdom. God’s wisdom wants to inform, instruct and inspire our everyday world of work and not just our Church-based activities.

“Tell all the skilled workers to whom I have given wisdom in such matters that they are to make garments for Aaron...” (Ex. 28:3)

“See I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills – to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts” (Ex. 31:2-4).

In our church there is one lady in particular who is the go-to person if you want a cake baked and decorated for a special occasion. That too is a spiritual gift which requires wisdom!

The book of proverbs has a very strong work ethic: -

“Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth”....“He who gathers crops in summer is a prudent son” (See Prov. 10:3-4). The “wife of noble character...selects wool and flax and works with eager hands...she sets about her work vigorously...let her works bring her praise at the city gate’ (Prov. 31:10-31).

Because the book has a strong work ethic, the lazy person comes in for a lot of ridicule. The sluggard doesn’t begin anything, finish anything or face anything! They are figures of fun! (See Prov. 6:9-11; 19:24; 20:4; 22:13)

But let’s remember here not to be judgemental towards those with disabilities and limitations but to find ways of encouraging them also to discover and use their gifts.

d. Our sex life.

This too is an area of our lives where wisdom is required. In keeping with the other books of the Bible, Proverbs is very affirming of sexual relationships in the context of heterosexual marriage. Sexual intercourse is for procreation, pleasure, and has a sacramental aspect in that the two, the man and the woman, become one flesh. Outside of this God-given context, sex can become sordid, confusing, and destructive. Instead of being a fountain of blessing it can lead to guilt, shame, deception, and death (See Proverbs chapter 5).

Wisdom involves Making Choices

Making the right choice is central to Biblical wisdom and this need for correct decision making is often expressed in the Bible by dualisms.

Here in Proverbs, we are presented with two possible paths to follow: -

“The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day. But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble” (Prov. 4:18&19). Also, there are two houses we can visit ~ either the house of wisdom or the house of folly: -

“Wisdom has built her house; she has set up its seven pillars. She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine; she has also set her table” (Prov. 9:1-2). “Folly is an unruly woman; she is simple and knows nothing. She sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the highest point of the city” (Prov. 9:13-14).

The book of Proverbs then, is about choice. It is addressed primarily to our will. Which path are we going to follow? Which house are we going to visit? Whose company are we going to keep? Whose advice are we going to listen to? In short, the choice is between wisdom and folly. There are only these two paths to follow; only two houses to visit and they are mutually exclusive. We cannot follow both paths; we cannot live in both houses. Jesus said the same thing (Mt. 7:13-27).

Today, many of us are already living in societies in which there is an overload of information, many ‘clever’ people designing sophisticated pieces of technology, yet there is often a scarcity of wisdom. General Omar Bradley who led the American 1st Army Division at Omaha Beach in Normandy on D-Day, 6th June 1944, and who later became a 5 Star General said this:

“We live in a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants, in a world that has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. We have solved the mystery of the atom and forgotten the lessons of the Sermon on the Mount. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about dying than we know about living. We have too many men of science and too few men of God.”

Folly, it seems, is gradually turning us into Godless and lawless societies which are polarised, impatient, and split into tribal groups.

This however, is nothing new. The Churches of the New Testament faced the same challenges and it is there we see that Christ himself is the fulfilment and embodiment of wisdom and that the gospel, though foolish to those who are perishing, is in fact the power and wisdom of God to those who are being saved.

Christ, the fulfilment of Wisdom and the Gospel as the Power and Wisdom of God.

Christ the fulfilment of Wisdom

Writing to the Church in Corinth, Paul says, “[Christ Jesus] has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). Writing to the Church in Colossae, Paul says his goal for them is that they may ‘know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Col. 2:2-3).

To know Christ, is to know wisdom.

A friend of mine studied at Oxford University. He was a Christian but his Tutor was an atheist. Sometimes they got into deep conversations and arguments but my friend told me that he always used to ‘win’ the arguments. Not because he was cleverer than his Tutor but because, without Christ, there is nothing at the centre of an atheist’s arguments!

Who and what is there to compare with the supremacy of Christ? He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over **all** creation. In him **all things** were created. **All things** have been created through him and for him. He is before **all things**, and in him **all things** hold together. It is through Christ that God will reconcile **all things** to himself (See Col. 1:15-20)

Without Christ at the centre of our thinking and our lives, everything flies apart, including the arguments of the atheist! Christ is the hub at the centre of the big wheel!

The Gospel as the Power and Wisdom of God

When Paul went to Athens and spoke about Jesus and the resurrection, most of the ‘clever’ philosophers of the day sneered. The Greeks, of course, prided themselves in their oratory; they believed in the ‘7 Principles of Classical Rhetoric’ ~ clarity, grandeur, speed, ethos, beauty, decorum (gravity) and tragedy. Paul didn’t come up to the mark; they described him as an ‘ignorant plagiarist,’ ‘an announcer of foreign demons,’ ‘a babbler’! (See Acts 17:16-34)

However, a few men and some women did become followers of Paul and believed.

When Paul went to Corinth, he said that Christ had sent him to ‘preach the gospel – not with human wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power’ (1 Cor. 1:17). His message and preaching ‘were not with wise and persuasive words but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power’ (1 Cor. 2:4-5).

How we need the Spirit’s anointing in our proclamation of the gospel!

However, even though we acknowledge Christ to be ‘the power of God and the wisdom of God’ (1 Cor. 1:24), the message is still going to appear to be ‘foolishness’ in the eyes of the world. Whenever I preach the gospel, I am always conscious that to some, my message will appear to be foolish. At the same time, however, I am aware that I am declaring God’s wisdom; not a human wisdom but a wisdom taught by the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:13).

When it comes to ‘wisdom’ we need careful discernment, for there is Divine wisdom taught by the Spirit which comes down from heaven, and there is earthly, human, unspiritual, demonic wisdom.

I’m reminded of the English proverb, ‘All that glitters, is not gold!’ And the Indian equivalent, ‘All that’s white, isn’t milk!’

Divine wisdom is characterised by purity, peace, consideration for others, submissiveness, mercy, impartiality, and sincerity. Demonic wisdom gives rise to bitterness, envy, selfish ambition, discord, fights, warfare, lawsuits, quarrels etc. (See James 3:13-18).

Wonderfully, we also read in James that, “If any one of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.” (James 1:5)

Given the complexity of the times in which we live and the multiple choices often laid before us, what a readily available and amazing offer this is!

George Irving – January 2026

I would like to acknowledge 3 books I have found helpful in writing this article: -

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Billington, Antony, *Proverbs – Wisdom for the Whole of Life*, The Gateway Seven Series, London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, 2018

Luckraft, Paul, *Words from the Wise – Exploring Biblical Wisdom*, Malcolm Down Publishing Ltd., 2024

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