**Proverbs**

**Expository sermons**

**Dennis K. Muldoon 2016**

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**Proverbs and wisdom** Proverbs 1:1-7

*(Scripture quotes from the New King James version unless otherwise indicated)*

We need wisdom in order to live in this world. The more wisdom the more skilful we will be in navigating our way through life. We are not born with wisdom; wisdom is learned by experience or from those who have gone before us. Wisdom is passed on from one generation to the next, often in the form of proverbs, short pithy statements that stick in the memory- this is the hope anyway! What proverbs do you remember? There are proverbs in every culture; often a different saying but conveying the same wisdom. ‘Look before you leap’ is a proverb that comes to mind. Another is, ‘a stitch in time saves nine’; this came to the mind of two commentators I read, both American.

Are these proverbs still being taught? We are living in a ‘knowledge revolution’, but I hope this wisdom is still being passed on. Judging by reports on the use of social media I have my doubts. Is the proverb, ‘A gentle answer turns away wrath’ (15:1), or another, ‘pride goes before a fall’ (16:18) being heard today? Not so long ago a Christian friend felt his family was getting too close to another family. He asked my advice and I referred to him to a proverb which states, ‘seldom set foot in your neighbour’s house, lest he become weary of you and hate you’ (25:17). ‘Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it’ (22:6) is another proverb we have heard, and paid heed to I trust. We are going to begin our study of this book by asking, ‘what is a proverb?’ before asking, ‘who wrote it?’ We will then briefly look at the prologue which includes the title, purpose of this book and what some call the motto of the proverbs.

**1. What is a proverb?**

There is a lot of wisdom here in the thirty-one chapters of this book, but how do we access it? How are we to read this book, let alone preach from it? Most, like Charles Spurgeon, preach from a few selected verses. Others group proverbs topically, which is what we will end up doing. But in any reading or preaching we must understand the genre of what is written. In the Book of Proverbs we find special genres, the proverb and wise saying. These are found in the Psalms also, and in other wisdom writings like Job and Ecclesiastes.

The first thing we note is that this is poetry. Poetry is meant to be read aloud; for this reason it includes alliteration, assonance, and rhyme. Hebrew poetry is not concerned with rhyme; we are more likely to find acrostics as in Psalm 119 and in Proverbs 31. Hebrew poetry, as found here in Proverbs, features ‘rhyming ideas’ rather than rhyming words. In other words, the second line of the poetic couplet responds to the idea of the first- what is called a ‘parallelism’.

This response may be in a number of ways. The second line may respond by amplifying the first line- a synthetic parallelism. For example, ‘Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it’ (22:6). This ‘adding’ to the first line may be in the form of a consequence. At times the second line reinforces the first, using slightly different words to express the same idea (synonymous parallelism): e.g. ‘he who loves pleasure will be a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not be rich’ (21:17). But mostly the second line contrasts with the first (antithetical parallelism). There is a contrast between the actions of a wise man and a fool, or between a righteous man and a wicked man/woman. For example, ‘The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish pulls it down with her hands’ (14:1) or, ‘A wise son makes his father glad, but a foolish man despises his mother’ (15:20).

Most of Proverbs is written in these couplets with parallel lines- 325 of them between chapters 10 and 22. In these chapters the couplets are strung together in an unrelated manner. This makes it difficult to read or study a passage. What we find is related ideas in couplets scattered through these chapters. For instance, couplets about a wife occur in 12:4, 18:22, 21:19 and 25:24. But in the first nine chapters couplets related to a common idea are linked in teaching oracles or instructions, usually directed at ‘my son’.

With regard to the broad context of divine revelation we know that, through Moses, God gave his chosen people the Law (Torah), the Ten Commandments and other laws. Obedience to God’s Law would bring God’s blessing, namely peace and prosperity in the Promised Land. What then of the place of proverbs? Are proverbs just secular wisdom? Certainly not. This wisdom is grounded in ‘the fear of the Lord’ (1:7). The name of the Lord is not prominent in this book but it is found a hundred times, and the covenant relationship between God and his people is assumed.

That said, these proverbs are applicable in the secular realm. They focus on the individual rather than the nation. The outcome of failing to follow this wisdom is not so much divine judgment as shame, loss and punishment in this present world. So Proverbs and wisdom literature complement the Law, usually as a positive expression of the Law. The Mosaic Law says, ‘do not commit adultery’. In Proverbs adultery is still a sin but we find reference to the consequences of such foolishness: ‘Jealousy is a husband’s fury, therefore he will not spare in the day of vengeance’ (6:34). They did not need family courts in ancient times because the jealous husband dealt with any wife snatcher!

The Hebrew Bible is divided into the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, or the Psalms, as Jesus stated (Luke 24:44). In the Book of Jeremiah the people spoke of the law, the counsel of the wise, and the word of the prophet (Jer 18:18). Wise counsel was sought by kings both in Israel and in other nations. Moses encountered wise men in the courts of Pharaoh; indeed, Joseph was such a man. We find wise men in the courts of Nebuchadnezzar also; Daniel became such a man. The source of Joseph’s and Daniel’s wisdom was, of course, different to that of their pagan partners who were astrologers and magicians. In 1923 archaeologists found an Egyptian document called the ‘Teaching of Amenemope’ containing proverbs very similar to some found here in the Bible- in Proverbs 17:22 -24:22. Scholars argue as to who borrowed from who, but what is found here in our Bible is divinely inspired even if previously known.

**2. Who wrote this book?**

This brings us to the question of who was the human author of the Book of Proverbs. We find the name of Solomon, son of David in the first verse. But we also find his name in chapter 10 and again in chapter 25 where the name Hezekiah also appears. Hezekiah, who was king of Judah some 250 years after Solomon, was involved in copying Solomon’s proverbs. In chapter 30 the name Agur appears, and in chapter 31 King Lemuel utters words his mother taught him. So the book as we have it is a collection of proverbs, or a ‘collection of collections of wisdom materials’, the vast majority of which come from the pen of Solomon.

King Solomon was famous for his wisdom. He spoke three thousand proverbs (1Kings 4:32). When he succeeded David as king he asked the Lord for wisdom, for the ability to judge between good and evil (1Kings 3:9). The Lord was pleased he did not ask for riches or long life or death to his enemies. So God gave Solomon a uniquely wise and understanding heart. He was wiser than anyone else in the East or in Egypt (1Kings 4:30-31). Such was his fame that the Queen of Sheba came to test his wisdom. He was able to answer all her questions about life, about living in this world. Wonderfully, we have the wisdom of Solomon, the wisdom God gave this man, written down here in our Bible. We will find wisdom for life, wisdom for living in this fallen and troubled world as we study this book.

What is even more wonderful is that we have Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus said to his disciples, ‘indeed, a greater that Solomon is here’ (Mat 12:42). Jesus is even greater than Solomon when it comes to wisdom. His disciples asked Jesus many questions and he answered them all. He also answered his opponents who came to test him with many questions. Jesus took to teaching in parables, which are not unlike proverbs. ‘The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman put in three measures of meal till it was all leavened’ (Mat 13:33), is a short pithy statement that sticks in the mind and causes us to think.

The apostle Paul refers to Jesus as, ‘wisdom from God’ (1Cor 1:30). He does so in the context of Greek philosophy which sought after wisdom. He concluded that their wisdom was foolishness compared to the wisdom of God (1Cor 3:19). We live in a world looking to science and technology to answer all our questions and solve all our problems- while at the same time telling the elderly they should commit suicide. Foolishness is now regarded as a neurological disease to be treated with drugs rather than wise counsel. Wise counsel like this in the Bible is rejected. Evolution-based societies, such as communist countries, regard the fear of the Lord as foolishness rather than the beginning of wisdom.

The wisdom of the world is demonic and sensual. The wisdom of the world is based on selfish pride and arrogance, on confusion and every evil thing (James 3:15-16). The wisdom we find here in the Bible is from above; it is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy (James 3:17). Here in Proverbs wisdom is spoken of in terms of what is right, just and fair (1:3).

**3. Title, purpose and theme**

Turning to the prologue to the Book of Proverbs, we have already noted the reference to Solomon as the writer. We will note the theme or motto as set down in verse 7, a key verse, but before this we have a few verses telling us the purpose of these proverbs. We are not born with wisdom- instincts yes, but wisdom no. So to get the wisdom we need to navigate life in this world we must learn it; we must listen to instruction (1:2, 3). We might think we know what is just and what is fair but without heavenly wisdom confusion reigns. And what is right? The wisdom of the Bible speaks in absolutes not just relative terms.

Wisdom teaches us prudence and discretion (1:4); to be prudent means to be cautious and considered rather than rash in speaking and in actions. ‘The simple believes every word but the prudent considers his steps’ (14:15). The young in particular must learn wisdom, but the wise will ‘increase learning’ all their life and remain ready to listen to ‘wise counsel’. But it is the young that are the focus of most of the instruction in this book. Wisdom is passed on from parent to child, where the child is prepared to listen and learn. It is passed on in the form of proverbs, enigmas or parables, and riddles (1:6).

My dog’s behaviour is governed by instincts and rules that I teach him to obey. Young people are not dogs. We do not leave them to live by instincts, and nor do we just lay down laws- ‘do this or else!’ We teach them to think, to consider the consequences of their behaviour, and this is where the proverbs and other wisdom writings help us. Sometimes it is adults, like King David, who need to learn wisdom; the prophet Nathan spoke to him in a parable. David’s grandson, Rehoboam, rejected the wisdom of the elders in favour of his young friends when he became king; the consequence was a revolt in which he lost ten of the twelve tribes (1Kings 12). Wisdom is more valuable than silver or gold (8:10, 19, cf. Ps 19:10, 119:127).

We said these proverbs were directed at the individual but we all live in relationships, with a mother and father at least. We live in family and also in community and need wisdom to do this with any degree of success. Fools chose to ignore God and the wisdom of elders; ‘they disrupt society, shame families and bear dreadful consequences’.

We conclude with the motto, the classic couplet contrasting wisdom and folly, or the wise person and the fool: ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction’ (1:7 cf. 9:10, Job 28:28, Ps 111:10). ‘Beginning’ means the first and the controlling principle for wisdom. ‘Knowledge’ depends on relationship. We get knowledge from other people and ultimately from God in the context of a relationship. Knowledge is conveyed in a covenant setting and involves character as well as words. Our covenant relationship with God is based upon the fear of the Lord, meaning humble reverence before Almighty God. The fool will not humble himself before the Lord, or before his own father, and so cuts himself off from the source of wisdom that is essential for life. The choice, dear friend, is yours.

**Beware bad company** Proverbs 1:8-19

Some years ago friends of my family took their daughter out of one school to enrol her in another. The reason was not that the new school was better; it was that their daughter was keeping bad company. A girl with loose morals had become her best friend. Their daughter was unable to break the friendship so the parents had to act. You may well know a young person who has been led astray by bad company. It is one of the concerns of godly parents. This is one of the reasons for reading the wise words found here in the Bible.

We are looking at words of wisdom spoken by a father to his son. Here in the early chapters of Proverbs we have twelve such examples of a father instructing his son. In this particular passage the son is told to beware of wicked fellows who entice you to do evil. They have a lust for violence and riches, riches without hard work. In later instructions the father warns of the lust of the flesh and the danger of the immoral woman.

You will note that we are looking at poetry. Most verses are of two lines- what we call a couplet. These two lines are related in some form of parallelism. The verses are also related to one another as the thought focusses on the father keeping his son from being led astray by foolish friends. In reading this first instruction-passage we have three points: badge of honour, bad company and blinded by evil.

**1. Badge of honour**

A baby is totally dependent on its parents for food and protection. As children grow up they learn to feed themselves, dress themselves and even protect themselves. They become more and more independent. With greater independence comes the necessity of making choices, of choosing the path to follow. Wisdom is needed in making such choices. The infant is given rules to obey with consequences administered by parents or teachers. The young person is given wisdom; the consequences of failing to follow this wisdom will come from life itself.

As we have seen, a father is instructing his son, giving his son wisdom for life. The mother is included because God’s design is for children to have a mother and a father. The first order of wisdom is that departing from God’s design and God’s law has consequences- negative consequences. The mother teaches the child from the day it is born. The helpless infant starts with a blank slate when it comes to knowledge and wisdom. Mother and father have an enormous task of imparting knowledge and wisdom such that the child will one day be able to survive and live independent from them. Independent living means making choices in life.

The first and most fundamental choice is about how to live, to live a righteous life or a wicked life, to be a wise person or a fool. No loving or godly parent wants their child to become a fool. As wise parents they will instruct their child from their earliest days in the way of righteousness, in what is right, just and fair (1:3). They will not teach their child to ‘do whatever it takes’, or ‘win at all costs’ even if this involves lying, bullying or cheating.

There is more to life than treasures and pleasures, riches, power and fame. There is something called honour. Honour is related to honesty and integrity, to righteousness, justice and fairness. Solomon speaks of the son wearing wisdom as a garland around his neck, or as a graceful ornament on his head (1:9). In the long run, such a garland is worth more than gold. Some communities show grace and respect with a garland placed around the neck. You may have been garlanded with flowers. Was this not better than an envelope with pieces of coloured paper called money?

‘To fear God and to act on that fear as it was compressed into the fibre of parental instruction is to be graced with the eye-catching beauty like the chains or necklace that adorned the beloved in the Song (4:9). Obedience makes a person delightfully outstanding to others and gives one something to cherish and value for oneself’.

I recall being garlanded by a very poor woman. She was so poor she could not afford to buy any flowers, so she made a garland of cheap biscuits and put around my neck. I learned a lot of wisdom from that lady. I learned to receive with grace even the smallest gift. It is good be a gracious receiver as well as a gracious giver. I trust you are not like a person I knew who went to the shops to find out the cost of every gift she was given. May we, each one, and our children, wear wisdom as a garland all the days of our life in this world!

**2. Bad company**

We sometimes wish we could put an old head on young shoulders. Is this a proverb? Boys soon grow into strong young men. We see them in the sporting arenas. But sometimes we also see young men in gangs, engaging in violent activities, even attacking innocent people. Too often the same young men from the sports field are in court because of violence off the field, as with a member of the current English cricket team. Drunkenness is often associated with their rude or violent behaviour but this is no excuse. The wise person does not get drunk (20:1). ‘The drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty’ (23:21).

Drunkenness often comes into play when young men are in a group and they succumb to peer pressure. Some young men have a daredevil mentality which emerges within a group or gang setting. The garland of honour and respect is replaced by a garland of greed and violence. We read here of a father telling his son not to associate with wicked ‘sons’ but to reject the enticing call of sinners. They may come as a group saying, ‘Come with us, and let us lie in wait to shed blood; let us lurk secretly for an innocent soul’ (1:11). Such excitement! The father’s son would never have thought of being violent himself but peer pressure, the pressure to belong, might lead him to such wickedness.

If the son listens to the wisdom of his father he will have nothing to do with such ‘friends’. He will not even set one foot upon the path they are following. Young men from our nation went to join one of the most violent gangs seen for a long time. They murdered and raped and pillaged their way across Syria and Iraq. The role that religion played in young men joining this gang was probably less that is made out. It was more of a call to get treasures and pleasures while shedding innocent blood.

The lure of gold is another temptation faced by young men, as well as old men. Coveting is not age-specific, but when combined with a lack of wisdom and a readiness to shed innocent blood we get a deadly combination. Young men may choose to get rich quick, to get rich without hard work, to get rich through violence. Wisdom tells of the consequences of such a choice but foolish ‘sons’ do not stop to consider the consequences. ‘Let’s do it together; let’s have a common purse’ they say (1:14).

Young men are vulnerable to peer pressure, the pressure to be accepted by peers, to be included and be valued. They can be blinded as to the outcome of their actions. The wicked know little of the ‘rewards’ of wickedness. Wise words like, ‘be sure your sin will find you out’, and the words of the Bible, ‘The wages of sin is death’ do not resonate in their ears as they listen to their friends rather than their father (Rom 6:23).

**3. Blind to evil**

After making his son aware of the way in which sinners will entice him into evil, into murder and robbery, the father tells him of the consequences of going along with such ‘friends’. He urges him to stay away from such people, friends or otherwise. ‘Do not walk with them because their feet run into evil’ (1:15, 16). This is a metaphorical walk, a walk referring to a way of life, although in this case it also carries a literal meaning; ‘keep your foot from their path’ or stay well clear of such people.

Some parents are so worried about their children not having friends that they pay no attention to the morality of the friends they get. Some parents, even Christian parents, are living a life of sorrow because they failed to say ‘no’ to their child wanting to go to a party or a sleepover at which drugs were made available. The father’s instruction in this wisdom passage is not, of course, about saying ‘no’; it is about teaching wisdom, about encouraging a son to himself say ‘no’ to peer pressure. Parental support helps them to say ‘no’; above all a knowledge of God’s grace in Jesus Christ helps them to say ‘no’.

The father shares a proverb with his son, a proverb about catching birds. It is ‘useless to spread a net in full view of all the birds’ (1:17 NIV). Men spread nets to catch animals but in doing so they have to ‘outwit’ as it were the animal or bird. They camouflage the net in some way. Even birds with their small brain do not fly straight into a net spread out to catch them. But these foolish young men are so blinded by the evil they are doing that they fail to see the trap set out before them, a trap of their own making. ‘The blind folly of greed leads to their doom… retribution is the law that will take away their lives’.

Those whose feet run into violence and looting, or murder and robbery, are in fact setting a net in which they themselves will be caught. They think they are clever, even invincible, but they are in fact fools. For a start, they fail to consider their own conscience, the guilt of bloodshed and ill-gotten gain. Then there is the hurt to those around them, to family and true friends. Then there is the fear of being caught by the authorities.

Sharing a common purse with a thief is utterly foolish (1:13). Fighting within the gang over the proceeds of crime often leads to their capture. ‘They lie in wait for their own blood, they lurk secretly for their own lives’ (1:18 cf. 1:11). This is the ‘sting in the tail’ as they say. The Psalmist prays of the wicked, ‘let his net that he has hidden catch himself; into that very destruction let him fall’ (Ps 35:8). Wise teachers often refer to the wicked falling into the pit they dug to catch someone else (Ps 7:15). The classic case of this was wicked Haman when he was hanged on the gallows he built for Mordecai. Modern technology like the internet and mobile phones are a great aid to criminals in planning and carrying out their crime, but this same technology often leads to their downfall, to their capture and incarceration.

The son who fails to listen to the instruction of his father and mother will one day regret setting his foot on the path of wicked friends. He will confirm the words found in verse 19: ‘so are the ways of everyone greedy for gain’. Note the word ‘everyone’. In the end there are no exceptions. Some continue in their evil ways longer than others but all will fall. Even if they escape the civil law court they will not escape the court of God. We mentioned conscience, and the loss of family and friends. If drink and drugs are included in violence the fool’s health will also suffer. In the end, as Jesus says, ‘what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul’ (Mat 16:26).

**Wisdom calls aloud** Proverbs 1:20-33

When God’s people turned away from worshipping the true God and started worshipping idols, God sent prophets to speak to them, men like Isaiah and Jeremiah. These prophets sometimes spoke directly to kings and rulers but mostly they spoke in public places- on a soap box as it were. Isaiah was told to, ‘Cry aloud, do not hold back’ (Isa 58:1). Jeremiah stood at the gate of the temple calling for the people to return to the Lord, and warning them of the consequences of failing to do so (Jer 7:1). They based their message on the law of God and the warnings given by Moses.

In the Book of Proverbs we do not find prophets calling aloud. Instead we find wisdom calling aloud (1:20). In the passage here at the end of chapter 1 wisdom is personified; we find this again in chapters 8 and 9. Because the word for wisdom is feminine plural we refer to the voice speaking as Lady Wisdom. Her words are similar to those of the prophets but their basis is wisdom rather than law. This wisdom is the gift of God, so both wisdom and law come from God (2:6). Wisdom is acquired through the fear of the Lord, and through listening to the one who is the source of wisdom. Listening to wisdom, as stated in verse 33, could just as well be listening to the Lord. As we listen to the words of Lady Wisdom we will do so under three headings: call of wisdom, calamity, and complacency.

**1. Call of wisdom**

‘Wisdom calls aloud in the street’ (1:20 NIV). The words that Lady Wisdom speaks are for all of us. They are not just for a select group of scholars or philosophers but for everyone. These words are proclaimed in the street, in the open square or market place, on the concourses and at the city gates. Cities in ancient times were enclosed by huge walls; the road or path along this wall was called a concourse. From Ruth chapter 4 we learn that the elders sat at the city gate to conduct court. Traders also gathered at the city gate to buy and sell their wares.

Jesus conducted his ministry in public places because what he had to say was for all the world to hear. Jesus taught crowds as they gathered on the shore of the lake or on the hillside. The apostle Paul also spoke in public places; he taught in synagogues and in meeting halls. We have the same gospel that Paul preached, and we continue to preach it in public places despite protests that we should ‘keep our religion to ourselves’.

The message of this public ministry is determined by God. We are not politicians aiming to please men because we need their vote. The prophets did not preach in order to please people; they preached in order to save people, save them from divine judgment. The preacher of wisdom warned of retributive judgment. ‘Wisdom is formidable, compelling and inescapable’. Ignoring wisdom has seemingly natural consequences. It is said that those who play with fire will get burnt (6:27). Those who ignore the call to evacuate when faced with a dangerous bushfire will get burnt.

‘How long you simple ones, will you love simplicity’ (1:22). An alternative translation for ‘simple’ is ‘naïve’. A simple person is someone ‘without moral direction and inclined to evil’. It is not referring to innocence but to procrastination, to putting off and failing to decide between wisdom and folly. ‘How long’ is not really a question; it is an indication that time is up and a choice or a commitment has to be made. Have you noticed how many people, especially young people, hate to make a commitment? They refuse to commit to a course of study, they refuse to commit to a particular job and they refuse to commit to a marriage. Most seriously, they refuse to commit their lives to the Lord, to live according to His commands and to godly wisdom.

‘How long’ means that time is up. Let there be no more wavering between two opinions. This is what Elijah said to the people of Israel on Mt Carmel (1Kings 18:21). The longer people wait the more likely they are to go the way of scorners and fools who find delight in criticising and despising anything and everything. Most Christians came to believe in Jesus when they were young. Most unbelievers waited. Another proverb says, ‘he who hesitates is lost’. The Bible says now, today, is the day of salvation’ (Acts 17:30).

Let the voice of wisdom be heard and heeded before entering upon the way of the wicked. And let those who have entered upon this path heed the rebuke and the call of wisdom. The promise of a new spirit, a spirit of wisdom, is there for the taking. ‘I will pour out my spirit on you’ in verse 23 sounds like the promise of the prophet Joel (Joel 2:28). Joel’s promise was fulfilled at Pentecost. Wisdom is, of course, associated with the gift of the spirit because Christ is the wisdom of God. Like Lady Wisdom, the prophets called upon the people to turn from their wicked ways and return to the Lord. The Lord is patient and longsuffering, but for how long? The demands of justice must be answered sooner or later. Those who reject the call of wisdom will in the end be rejected by wisdom. They will suffer the consequences of their folly.

**2. Calamity**

‘I will laugh at your calamity, I will mock when terror strikes you’ (1:26). Terror may come like a storm or whirlwind; it comes suddenly and with devastating force. Recall the ‘great wind’ that hit the house where Job’s children were partying (Job 1:18, 19) - although we are not exactly told that this was divine judgment. The devastation pictured in Proverbs is probably more akin to the picture of those who build their house on a sandy foreshore, or in the flood zone of a river. Wisdom says, ‘I will laugh at your calamity, just as the Lord looks from heaven and laughs at the people who rage against his chosen One (Ps 2:4, Mat 7:24-26).

Wisdom is not laughing at misfortune but at the downfall of fools. We cannot refrain from laughing at the robber who locks himself in the bank, or crashes his car while escaping. We say that such a person got what he deserved, declaring this to be natural justice. Even so, natural justice is not outside the realm of God’s sovereignty. Distress and anguish are the consequence of foolishness but also punishment sent by the Lord; in his displeasure the Lord distresses them (1:27, Ps 2:5). Anxiety and depression have reached almost epidemic proportions in our society.

Today medication and therapies are sought by millions, but does anyone stop to ask the cause of such ‘distress and anguish’? To what extent is foolishness the cause? Too what extent is refusal to listen to wisdom the cause? People demand to be in control of every aspect of their lives; when they lose this control they go into meltdown. The path of foolishness is the path of ‘me in control’ at all times’, while the path of wisdom is the path of the Lord being in control; the path of the fear of the Lord.

The son who joined a gang to get rich quick, like everyone greedy for gain, loses out in the end (1:19). Whether the calamity is loss of money, loss of a marriage or loss of health, we ask to what extent foolishness is involved. Wisdom warns against greed, yet we still see people responding to emails from Nigeria promising huge investment returns or a rich man looking to marry. We still see people pursuing divorce when wisdom says there are never any winners in a divorce. ‘Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall’ (16:18). How many personal calamities could have been avoided by listening to this wisdom?

In verse 28 Lady Wisdom no longer speaks to the simple but speaks about them. ‘They will call to me, but I will not answer’. They will seek wisdom but not find it. Why? Because they hated wisdom all their life! They did not choose the fear the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom (1:29). Therefore, in the day of calamity wisdom will remain silent. They have lived by the fear of man and the fear of things in this world, and they will die in such fear. They shall eat the fruit of their folly (1:30). They have lived by their own wisdom but worldly wisdom fails. Worldly wisdom fails to deliver in the day of disaster. The prophets spoke of idols failing to help those who worship them when disaster comes. Moreover, Jeremiah is told not to pray for the people because the Lord had stopped listening to them.

**3. Complacency**

‘The complacency of fools will destroy them’ (1:32). Prosperity can be a dangerous thing. Solomon did not pray for riches, and neither did Agur who wrote, ‘lest I be full and deny the Lord’ (30:9). Prosperity leads to complacency, to the idea that we can ‘manage just fine’ without the Lord. Moses understood this as he warned the people against forgetting the Lord as they enjoyed the ‘milk and honey’ the Lord would give them in the Promised Land (Deut 6:10-12).

‘The waywardness of the simple will kill them’ (1:32 NIV). Working long hours in order to get rich may affect one’s health- how many are taking a drink after work as a ‘pick-me-up’. Failing to rest and worship on the Lord’s Day takes a heavy toll on health and family life. Someone commented that suicide may be implied in this piece of wisdom. Sadly our parliaments are occupied by many who are simple, many who live by worldly wisdom.

Those who call for assisted suicide are such people, people who fail to understand many things, including the sanctity of life. It comes back to this matter of personal control, of demanding to be in control of every aspect of life, including death. Those who failed to choose life when it was offered to them have only one choice left, that of death, as in suicide. They failed to acknowledge the God of creation, the God who gives life and takes it away, the God who offers eternal life to those who choose wisdom, who choose to repent and believe in Jesus Christ.

The message of Lady Wisdom ends on a positive note: ‘Whoever listens to me will dwell safely, and will be secure without fear of evil’ (1:33). Wisdom has its fruits, just as folly has its fruits. Jesus spoke of knowing a tree by its fruit. As an inspired writer, the apostle Paul wrote godly wisdom when he wrote, ‘whatever a man sows, that he also will reap’ (Gal 6:7). Wisdom’s fruit is safety and security, a life of ease rather than a life of striving, a life of true joy and happiness because this can only be found in the Lord.

The Lord is to be feared because he is the almighty and all-powerful creator and sustainer of everything, including the rulers of the nations. We cannot be in control of everything but God can, and he is. Trusting in God is like a child trusting in their father to protect them and provide for them. When the fool is distressed and in anguish, the wise person is trusting in their heavenly Father. ‘Do not be anxious, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God’ (Phil 4:6). This is the way of wisdom, the way that leads to peace and happiness in this life no matter what the outward circumstances. This is the way to life everlasting through Jesus Christ our Lord. Which path are you on right now?

**Wisdom and a life of integrity** Proverbs 2

The mob that attacked the house of Jason in Thessalonica, looking to grab the apostle Paul and stone him, were shouting, ‘These who have turned the world upside down have come here’ (Acts 17:6). The man who preached forgiveness of sin in Jesus Christ, who preached ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ and ‘expel the immoral brother’ at Corinth, and who organised a collection for the poor in Jerusalem, was accused of turning the world upside down. We ask what the world was like before he turned it upside down.

Christians were despised in the Roman world because they did not have an idol to worship; they worshiped a man who was crucified. So it has been down through history. The gospel of Jesus Christ promises, and delivers, new life, a life of peace and love, yet it has been and continues to be hated by this world. The reason, said Jesus, is that men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil (2:13, John 3:19). Men love lies and corruption rather than the truth. Men and women reject wisdom because wisdom is founded in the fear of the Lord.

In Proverbs 2 we find a father again instructing his son, and any who are ready to listen to words of wisdom. The father wants his son to live a fruitful life in this world, to live with honesty and integrity, to live in righteousness, justice and equity or fairness (2:9). To do this he urges his son seek wisdom above everything else. Solomon knew what he was talking about because he asked the Lord for wisdom rather than riches or long life or death to his enemies- although Solomon failed to listen to his own wisdom when it came to foreign women. This chapter is a unit, but we will look at it under three broad subheadings as suggested by Kidner: Wisdom, hard-won, Wisdom, God-given, and Wisdom protects from evil men and immoral women.

**1. Wisdom, hard -won**

We are not born with wisdom. A new born left to its own will not survive. A young child left to its own will have no skills in developing a relationship with God or with other people. God established families for the purpose of teaching wisdom. He provided a manifesto of wisdom that parents are to teach their children. This wisdom is the most precious thing in the world because it enables men and women created in the image of God to live in obedience to God’s commands, and to worship the true and living God.

‘If you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures’ (2:4). We must understand the value of wisdom when it comes to negotiating the ups and downs, and the many turns that we face in life. Those who are older will have negotiated many of these challenges- successfully so if you are here worshipping today. We urge the young to listen to wisdom in order to navigate life in this world.

The opening verses of this chapter are full of action words: receive, treasure, incline your ear, apply your heart, cry out for, seek and search. These actions are all directed at getting wisdom, understanding and discernment. Wisdom is likened to hidden treasure, not unlike the way Jesus likened the kingdom of God to buried treasure (Mat 13:44). Those who recognise the value of wisdom and are serious about getting this treasure will surely find it. ‘When you seek wisdom you find God because God is the source of wisdom and knowledge’ writes one commentator. Wisdom is not something you have to buy- indeed, it cannot be bought because it is the gift of God.

Knowledge is important and we use our brains to study maths, science and other disciplines. But when it comes to wisdom we use our hearts as well as our brains. ‘Apply your heart to understanding’ (2:2). It is gained through discernment. Anyone, even a fool, can study maths and science, but gaining wisdom is another matter. It requires passion and commitment to the goal of a life worth living. The fool may be clever, but without wisdom knowledge is useless- it may even be self-destructive. Splitting the atom was a clever discovery but such knowledge in the hands of a fool is dangerous. More recent discoveries pose similar dangers in the hands of fools, of those without God-given wisdom.

**2. Wisdom, God-given**

‘Seek and you will find’ said Jesus (Mat 7:7). He was talking about seeking the gifts of God, including the wisdom of God- as in ‘what you want men to do for you, do also to them’ (Mat 7:12). A sincere, wholehearted search will lead to understanding the fear of the Lord and finding the knowledge of God (2:5). Note the ‘if’ and ‘then’ in verse 4 and 5 respectively. When you understand the fear of the Lord, when you know that God is awesome and almighty, the one who inhabits eternity, but is also the loving God who dwells with those having humble hearts, then you know that you have wisdom.

‘For the Lord gives wisdom’ (2:6). God speaks wisdom with every word he utters. Wonderfully the Lord has spoken and we have his words here in the Bible. As recipients of divine wisdom, ‘sound wisdom for the upright’ (2:7), we are rich beyond measure.

We spoke about the many challenges we face in life. Walking in the fear of the Lord does not mean we will not face troubles and trials. Fools despise wisdom and hate those who walk in the light. In their cleverness they attack the upright; they set traps for the upright. The Pharisees spent much time and effort trying to trap Jesus. But the wisdom of God was a shield protecting Jesus from his enemies. The wisdom of God found in Jesus Christ, and in the written word of God, will shield you from your attackers, from those who love to scorn the upright and delight in lies rather than truth. Truth is not determined by majority vote; truth is revealed by God and is unchanging. Justice is also revealed by God. Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6). ‘This is how we know what love is, he [Jesus] laid down his life for us’ (1John 3:16).

A second ‘then’ tells us that we ‘will understand righteousness, justice and equity, every good path’ (2:9) when we walk in the fear of the Lord. The Lord is righteous and just, and hates partiality. ‘Discretion will preserve you; understanding will keep you’ (2:11). When you face troubles, trials and temptations, what do you do? Do you worry and lose sleep? James tells us to ‘count it all joy when you fall into various trials’ (James 1:2). He tells us to ask God for wisdom- he will surely give it, providing we ask in faith. We ask in faith when we truly believe God is all powerful and to be feared, but at the same time is the loving, covenant-making God. You will be tested but God will provide a way out (1Cor 10:13). He will give you understanding and discernment in each and every trouble or trial you face.

**3. Wisdom protects from evil men and immoral women**

In teaching his son the father gives two examples of the value of wisdom. Firstly, it will deliver or save you from the way of evil, from the man who speaks perverse things (2:12). In his first word of instruction in the previous chapter he similarly warned his son not to get into a gang of wicked and violent fellows. Here he tells his son that wisdom, wisdom given by God, will protect him from men of perverted speech. We might include those who write perverse things. So much of what we hear and read today is perverse; it is based on lies like evolution and man-made climate change.

Years ago I had a job in scientific research but today it would be difficult for me to get such a job because of prevailing ideologies- not just because I am too old! Many scientific institutions only employ scientists who agree with their ideologies. I heard that in the USA the vast majority of scientific institutions have adopted a party-political stand, meaning if you hold the ideologies of another group you will not be welcome. I have read of academics refusing to have students in their class if they do not believe in man-made climate change.

Perversity prevails not only in our parliaments but also, it seems, in the halls of science. Why? Because men do not fear God, and the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. They walk in the ways of darkness as Jesus said in referring not just to morality but with regard to their whole world view. It is not by accident that scientific publications are increasingly being found to contain falsified data or to have excluded data not favourable to the hypothesis or ideology being propagated. Many scientists, as well as politicians and businessmen, can be included among those ‘whose ways are crooked, and who are devious in their paths’ (2:15). Such ways begin in the home and the school. They can be taught to our children if we are not alert and wise like the father teaching his son in this chapter.

The second example of wisdom’s protection relates to the ‘immoral woman’ (2:16). Young men and women will be confronted by sexual immorality; it was so in the days of Solomon and it is so today. In fact, it was so in the days of Abraham when the people of Sodom were confronted by sexual immorality in the form of homosexuality. History tells us that it was rampant in Rome before it fell. The apostle Paul writes of some in the church at Corinth coming from a background of fornication, adultery, homosexuality and sodomy (1Cor 6:9).

The ‘immoral woman’ is literally ‘foreign woman’. She is not necessarily a foreigner but ‘is estranged from the corporate life of the community with its social and religious conventions’. She has ‘forgotten the covenant of her God’ (2:17). Most take this to mean the marriage covenant, as in Malachi 2:14, but Kidner thinks it refers to the Mosaic covenant which prohibits adultery. This woman no longer belonged to the covenant people because she had broken the covenant. Both covenants are established by God for the good of his people. Disregarding these covenants will result in the loss of covenant blessings.

Young men in particular need wisdom in the face of seduction by the immoral woman. The reverse is also true in our society where the young woman is not as physically protected as she was in ancient societies; she needs the protection of wisdom. The failure of many to make their marriage commitment public adds to the dangers faced by the young in our society.

‘For her house leads down to death’ and, ‘none who go to her return’ (2:18, 19). Kings have surrendered their throne because of a woman’s power of seduction. From Westminster to Hollywood, men are being destroyed because of sexual immorality. Some do indeed lose their lives, often by their own hand, because of the shame incurred through lack of wisdom. Those who seek wisdom will find it, and wisdom will protect them from sexual immorality. ‘He who commits adultery with a woman lacks understanding; he who does so destroys his own soul’ (6:32).

The father’s instruction ends with unambiguous statements regarding the consequences of following wisdom in contrast to wickedness. These consequences are similar to those declared by Moses after he reminded the people of the covenant commands of God. Obedience would lead to divine blessings in the land; disobedience would lead to divine cursing and removal from the land (Deut 28). Wisdom says that ‘the upright will dwell in the land, and the blameless will remain in it’ (2:21). The blameless are not sinless; in the parallelism of this couplet the blameless are the same as the upright.

Dwelling in the land means God-guaranteed peace and security (1:33). ‘But the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the unfaithful will be uprooted from it’ (2:22). ‘Uprooted’ sounds like violent removal. The wicked love violence but this will not save them. The wicked are ‘unfaithful’, unfaithful to the covenant of God; they will not be allowed to remain among God’s holy people. Those who fail to seriously seek the wisdom of God will suffer shame and disgrace. In the end they will be removed from the community of God’s people and from the presence of the Lord for ever.

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart** Proverbs 3:1-20

When we think of wisdom, and the Book of Proverbs in particular, we look for practical advice. We come looking for answers to some problem we face; it might be about money, about bringing up children or about dealing with a neighbour. We will find such practical wisdom, but it comes within the context of relationships, your covenant relationship with the Lord in particular. So as we keep hearing that ‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’, do not get impatient. As we hear that wisdom is to be sought after as a precious possession do not get impatient. Wisdom is promised to those who seek it, to those who understand that it is the Lord who gives wisdom (2:6).

In this next chapter of instructions given by a father to his son we begin to find practical wisdom, as in short statements about money and about neighbours. This comes within the context of a covenant relationship, as just noted. It is a father instructing his son and more importantly, his instructions come in the context of trusting in the sovereign, all-powerful God of creation and salvation. We come to the well-known words of Proverbs 3:5 & 6, to words of wisdom that you may have posted on your wall and words that children learn in song. These words explain what it means to fear the Lord. In this chapter we also find words of advice for when we are being chastened or disciplined by the Lord, words that the writer to the Hebrews quotes as he teaches us about running the race that is the Christian life. He must have seen drifters in the church, just as we do today. Imagine sitting in a boat drifting down the Niagara River. Such a person desperately needs wisdom. They need to understand just where they are headed and take steps to avoid disaster.

If you are in a football team and fail to show up for training, what happens? You get dropped from the team. You are out of the game. Yet some Christians think they can stay in the race without training. When the Lord drags them to a training session, as in some hardship or suffering, they complain bitterly. Christians must keep in shape, spiritual shape. We do this by being serious about Bible study, about prayer and about the fellowship (Acts 2:42). This chapter begins with instructions about the path of life, about pride, possessions and punishment, and then there is a poem in praise of wisdom.

**1. Path of life**

The father urges his son not to forget ‘my law’- the word is ‘*torah*’. This is not exactly God’s law, although the father’s teaching, as we see, is based upon the law of God given by Moses. These laws must be written on the heart (Jer 31:33), where they will remain all the days of the son’s life. These laws are the recipe for a long and fruitful life. They are the recipe for peace and prosperity. When Solomon prayed for wisdom God gave him wisdom, along with riches and a long life if he walked in the path of wisdom (1Kings 3:14).

The path of wisdom is the path of ‘mercy and truth’ (3:3), or in a better translation, ‘steadfast love’ (*chesed*) and ‘faithfulness’. These are characteristics of the Lord God himself- they are covenantal terms (Exod 34:6, Ps 103:4). These characteristics are fundamental to a life worth living. Never forget love and faithfulness. Bind them around your neck if you need to (3:3). Moses told the people to ‘bind on their hands’ and ‘write on their doorposts’ the commands of the Lord, if this was what it takes to remember them. But the best and necessary thing to do is to ‘write them on the tablet of your heart’ (3:3). Let these truths become firmly implanted in your heart where they will influence your every thought and every action.

By all means write God’s laws on your walls, but it is by living out these truths that you will please the Lord and be a blessings to other people. Jesus said, ‘By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another’ (John 13:25). As a member to the body of Christ we should always be ‘speaking the truth in love’ (Eph 4:15). When we walk in truth and love we find favour in the sight of God and man (3:4). To be known as a person of integrity and loving kindness is more important in the end than being rich and powerful. What is the point of wealth if you don’t enjoy it? And how can you enjoy it without friends? Even if you are rich you will not have friends if you are a fool- apart from fellow fools!

Finding favour in the sight of God and man is what the Bible says about Samuel as a young man (1Sam 2:26), and about Jesus as a young man (Luke 2:52). In teaching about food and the weaker brother, the apostle Paul calls for the exercise of love and understanding, and the pursuit of peace. He says that one who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men (Rom 14:18). Men and women of integrity, of love and faithfulness are respected, even as they are hated by the wicked.

If you know the words of verses 5 &6 that is good but are they written on your heart? Are they words you understand, words that control the way you live? Trust is like faith; it means active belief in the Lord. It means you are not living by your own understanding, by what is called common sense. Common sense says that peace comes through agreeing with everyone. But this may lead to agreeing with the wicked and joining them on the path to destruction. If you want to avoid offending anyone, what about the immoral woman in 2:16? Sometimes wisdom says ‘No’, when common sense says ‘Yes’.

We might highlight the word ‘all’ in these verses; ‘all’ means complete and without exception. Trusting in the Lord with all your heart means that nothing less than all your heart will suffice. It means whole-hearted acceptance of the Lord’s will and his ways in every aspect of your life. The Lord promises to make your paths straight- trust Him! A chorus goes like this, ‘with Christ in the vessel you can smile at the storm, as you go sailing home’.

**2. Pride**

‘Do not be wise in your own eyes’ (3:9). Wisdom says that pride is a dangerous thing (16:18). Many a man has fallen because of his pride. Sadly, this is our default condition; we are born proud and selfish. ‘Professing to be wise they became fools’ said the apostle Paul of those who reject God’s revelation in the creation and his word (Rom 1:22). The answer or antidote to this dangerous spiritual condition is the fear of the Lord. ‘Fear the Lord and depart from evil’ (3:7).

This spiritual malady leads to physical maladies. Those afflicted with an unhealthy dose of their own importance often become obsessed with their looks- they become narcissistic. Women abuse their bodies in an effort to be outwardly beautiful, and men are doing the same. Some even take steroids to make their muscles grow, endangering their health. Why? They do not accept the body the Lord gave them, because they do not know the fear of the Lord. They do not know wisdom which says that life is more than food and clothes and good looks.

The worldly-wise are given up to uncleanness, to dishonouring their bodies in reckless living (Rom 1:24). The heavenly-wise, on the other hand, enjoy wholistic health and well-being. We know that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, that we are complex beings in the hand of the all-knowing and all-powerful, yet loving God. Our mental and spiritual well-being affects our physical well-being.

**3. Possessions**

Many proverbs have an ‘if-then’ format; a type of synthetic parallelism. This may be in a couplet or, in this case, two couplets- verse 9 and 10. The first couplet tells us how to honour the Lord with our possessions and the second promises that our barns will be filled. We cannot take the promise of verse 10 without the condition of verse 9. The promise is genuine; it is guaranteed by the Lord himself.

The Lord is more than able to fill our barns, as it were, but he chooses to do so on the condition of our trusting in him. In his wisdom he commands us to honour Him with our first-fruits. This is much the same as the Mosaic command to tithe the first of all produce from the land for the benefit of the Levite or priest, the stranger, the orphan and the widow (Deut 26:12). First-fruits clearly applies to the first portion of your pay-packet. This is a tangible way of trusting in the Lord- in all your ways, remember! We trust our finances to the Lord, giving him the first-fruit not the left-overs if there happens to be any.

**4. Punishment**

‘My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord’ (3:11). A wise father corrects his son when he wanders from the path of wisdom. The wise son will not resent, or react negatively to such correction because it is done in love for the son’s benefit. Punishment by way of correction is undertaken within the covenant relationship between father and son. Our heavenly Father also corrects those who are his children. He corrects us for our own good and for his glory. To watch a child step off the path and into danger, and do nothing, is not being loving.

In the NT we find this proverb quoted in full (Heb 12: 5-6). The nature of the correction is not specified, apart from ‘various trials’ (James 1:2, 1Peter 1:6). We know the details of the trials and testing that Job faced: loss of all possessions, all family and of his health. The Lord was in control though not responsible for Job’s afflictions. Job learned from his testing and the Lord blessed him. ‘Shall we not be… in subjection to the Father of our spirits and live’ (Heb 12:9).

**5. Poem in praise of wisdom**

The poem begins, ‘Happy/blessed is the man who finds wisdom’ and ends, ‘Happy are all who hold her fast’ (3:13, 18). It is better to have wisdom than wealth. It takes wisdom to understand this piece of wisdom. Many choose wealth over wisdom. They prosper for a while but, as the Psalmist reminds us, ‘consider the end of the wicked who prosper’ (Ps 73:17, 18). The Psalmist asks the Lord guide him and receive him into glory (Ps 73:24). He also teaches us that the word of the Lord is to be desired more than gold (Ps 19:10). When I asked a student of mine what he was going to do after finishing his studies he replied, ‘make a lot of money’. But he listened the voice of wisdom and chose another path; he is now a missionary.

Jesus said, ‘seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness’ (Mat 6:33). Jesus demands first place in your life. The young ruler who chose to keep his wealth lacked wisdom. Jesus was not just making a selfish demand of this young man; he was teaching this young man wisdom. Wealth will fail. Wealth will not give life. Wisdom is the source of life and Jesus is that wisdom. Wisdom is more profitable than gold, silver or rubies will ever be. Nothing in this world will reward you like wisdom (3:15).

What do you desire in life? Most choose to live a long and enjoyable life. Wisdom offers length of days in her right hand (3:16). Would you like to have riches and honour? Wisdom offers these in her left hand. Solomon sought wisdom first and these things were given to him. If he had sought these things without wisdom he may have ended up like many other kings- in an early grave. Many are seeking fame and fortune in this world. They want their names listed in some hall of fame. But the wise person will be looking to have their name in the Book of Life. They will be looking for the Lord’s commendation, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant’.

Finally, wisdom is pictured as a tree that the wise person clings to. In this tree they find abundant fruit, life giving fruit, because this is the tree of life. They find peace and joy such that their days are not just lengthened but are pleasant and productive. Are you such a person? Seek and you will find. Seek the truth. Seek the way. Seek the life. Seek the Lord Jesus Christ and you will find him and you will lack no good thing.

Do not be a doubter when comes to choosing wisdom. As if to confirm the sovereign power of God to deliver what he promises, the writer reminds us that by wisdom the Lord founded the earth and the heavens (3:19). The Lord in his wisdom created this world, and his wisdom permeates the whole creation. The wise person will see wisdom behind the created order. Those who refuse to accept the creation order will suffer shame and destruction.

**Wisdom and your neighbours** Proverbs 3:21-35

Do you have good neighbours? When looking to buy a house, look further than the house itself- look at neighbouring properties and look at your neighbours. Some people have had to sell up and move because of their neighbours. I trust no one has had to sell up and move because of you! Who is your neighbour? You may say the person living next door but it is also the person you work with and the person you socialise with- although you are free to choose those you socialise. We live in a family, and relationships within this family are in a sense neighbour relationships. The Lord gives us the wisdom necessary to live in close relationships: husband-wife, parent- child, and then the in-laws.

I grew up on a farm a few hundred acres in size. My Dad could not imagine having neighbours less than a stone’s throw away. But still we had neighbour problems from time to time. The neighbour’s Friesian bull kept getting through the fence to our cows! To other neighbours Dad was generous in lending farm machinery; this was the way in the bush. But in his later years new neighbours- ‘city- slickers’ he called them- took advantage of his neighbourliness and failed to return what he loaned them. Are you a good neighbour?

We will come to wisdom in dealing with your neighbour in our third point. Our first point is ‘surefooted walking’, our second, ‘sweet sleeping’ and our fourth point, ‘scorned by the Lord’.

**1. Surefooted walking**

The father continues teaching his son wisdom. In the first half of this chapter he warned against pride, against trusting in wealth and about refusing the chastening of the Lord. Putting this into the positive it becomes trusting in the Lord, submitting to God, being teachable, being generous and learning from adversity. In today’s passage the teaching is predominantly negative, as in ‘do nots’. The first instruction is, do not let sound doctrine and discretion depart from your eyes (3:21). Can you think of any occasion in which you lost sight of wisdom and discretion? ‘Where do I start’ you say? What about anger? What about the lust of the flesh? What about riches? When were you last not walking in the way of wisdom- or we could say not walking in the way of the Lord since the Lord gives wisdom? What about your life at the present?

We often refer to life as a journey. We cannot go back but we can learn from the past. If you are young you can learn from others- as is the case in this passage where the father is instructing his son. Whatever our age, we are entering uncharted waters each day. Whatever our age we need wisdom if we are to safely navigate these waters or, in the imagery of this passage, to walk safely and not stumble. Indeed, our life depends on surefooted walking. Can you remember periods of stumbling in your life, periods of fearing what tomorrow will bring?

The fact that you are listening to this word today means you have made it through those obstacles in your path that caused you to stumble. Yet you may know some who have failed to do so, those whose marriage failed, those whose health failed through lack of wisdom, or those whose faith failed. We will see at the end of this passage that the Lord will not bless the person or the home of the perverse or wicked person. He blesses the home of the just or righteous.

**2. Sweet sleep**

Did you know that the Bible talks about ‘sweet sleep’? I thought such beautiful language came from nursery rhymes! Is sweet sleep something you enjoy? Or has your sleep been disturbed of late? What disturbs our sleep? Babies may do so! Physical pain may disturb our sleep, but often the cause is anxiety and fear. By keeping busy in the day we can keep those fears away but when we stop and put our head on the pillow fears flood our minds and disturb our sleep. What happens is those little worries of the day become huge fears at night- even irrational fears, with bad dreams thrown in. We anxiously await the light of day to calm those fears.

With wisdom, heavenly wisdom, we can calm those fears that disturb us when we lie down. ‘When you lie down, you will not be afraid’ (3:24). We do not have to fear trouble from the wicked. We do not have to fear sudden terror. As a child I insisted on having my bedroom door closed so no bulls could get me while I slept- what, with all the talk about the neighbour’s bull! My mother, of course, explained that bulls did not come into houses. She also reminded me of the promises of God in the Bible like, ‘The Lord is my shepherd… I will fear no evil’.

‘For the Lord is your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught’ (3:26). This is the wisdom of Solomon. I was more concerned about being fast footed to escape the bulls than about my foot being caught! But we understand the comforting truth of these wise words I hope. Trust in the Lord in all your ways, and at all times. Trust everything in your life into his mighty and gracious hands, and your sleep will be sweet.

**3. Support your neighbour**

We are more familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan than we are with these words from the Book of Proverbs, but the lesson is the same. Jesus was explaining the command to love your neighbour as yourself. The priest and the Levite failed to help a neighbour when they had opportunity. They failed to demonstrate love towards a fellow human being made in the image of God. In the words of wisdom, they failed to do good when they had the opportunity to do so (3:27). It was not a question about resources or saying, ‘I cannot do anything’. It was a question about love, love for your neighbour.

Wisdom surrounding your relationship with your neighbour comes in five ‘do nots’ in verses 27-32. We have just learned ‘do not withhold good’. In the positive it means help your neighbour whenever you can. The second ‘do not’ tells us to actually do this and not just think about it. To think about helping is better than ignoring your neighbour and his need, but do not delay, do not make the person wait unnecessarily.

Moses writes of the specific instance of paying a worker on time (Deut 24). James reminds us that cries of the workers reach the ears of the Lord (James 5:4). You may not be an employer but the same applies to loans you might take. Pay the loan back on time, and if you can’t then don’t take it. There are many sour relationships in our town, even in our families, because of the lack of wisdom with regard to prompt fulfilment of promises.

The third ‘do not’ is, ‘do not devise evil against your neighbour, for he dwells by you for safety’s sake’ (3:29). I spoke about the blessing of having good neighbours on your street. You have to work at keeping them good neighbours- again, this lesson applies to colleagues and even family. Be quick to do them good but slow to pay back evil. In fact, do not devise evil at all. Do you have a neighbour who does things that irritate you- like sending their children to your place to play? Years ago I got irritated because my neighbour drove up my driveway to access his front lawn. I thought about putting up a barrier but wisely desisted. I think he still drives up my driveway but I no longer notice. I can tell him when I am going away and he watches our house. Above all, do not withhold good from a family member or devise evil against your closest of neighbours.

The next ‘do not’ is similar to the previous; ‘do not strive with a man without cause if he has done you no harm’ (3:30). Other translations have ‘do not accuse’ or ‘do not quarrel’. There is a saying, ‘you may win an argument but lose a friend’. My neighbour was not really doing any harm using my driveway, apart from harming my pride! How often do we fall out with our neighbour because of pride? Just as, ‘a soft answer turns away wrath’ (15:1), so a good deed done to a neighbour quenches any flames of anger or malice.

To recap so far, from helping, and helping promptly, we moved on to desisting from evil towards your neighbour. The final ‘do not’ is, do not envy the oppressor/violent man’ (3:31). Maybe your neighbour is rich and powerful- again in your street or in your workplace. Such people are often oppressors, men without principles, even perverse individuals. You might start to envy the power and influence of such a neighbour, just like the Psalmist in Psalm 73. The wise course of action is to stay well away from such a person- unless he falls into trouble, and even then be aware that the Lord may be punishing him.

One commentator writes, ‘No person is as sick, no society in as grave a condition as the person or society that lionises the wicked and sets the violent on pedestals for adulation… Given the level of violence that prevails in our communities, whether local or international, this admonition has lost none of its cogency’.

**4. Scorned by the Lord**

Divine wisdom is beneficial to all. What we have just learned about being a good neighbour is something we might see in unbelievers because of common grace. But it is not really a matter of common sense. In many places such ‘common sense’ is noticeably uncommon. Wisdom that is pure and peaceable and full of mercy, is from above. (James 3:17). The Lord has something to say and may well take action when he sees oppression and injustice.

The divine assessment declared upon the perverse person in verse 32 could be widened to include the wicked in general (cf. Ps 1:4-5). The Lord detests the selfish, inconsiderate neighbour; he finds the bully or the oppressor an abomination. He delights in the upright who listen to his counsel, as set forth in the Scriptures and in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Bullying in schools was back in the news this week with another ‘zero tolerance’ website or policy launched. The wise person finds it interesting that this evil has been around for generations- there is nothing new under the sun (Eccl 1:9). All that is new is that sin is no longer called sin, and man’s wisdom and his websites do nothing to address the cause of such oppression. Children will not listen to the words of parents and teachers unless they see such words in action. The Lord delights in the upright who listen to his counsel as set forth in the Scriptures, and in his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Just as Moses details curses for disobedience to God’s commands, and blessing for obedience, so Solomon declares, ‘the curse of the Lord on the house of the wicked, but blessing on the home of the upright’ (3:33). Failure to listen to this wisdom will not only bring the wrath of your neighbour; it will bring the wrath of God, if you are failing to show mercy and justice towards your neighbour. If you want the blessing of the Lord upon your house then, ‘love your neighbour as yourself’.

In a parallel verse we read, ‘the Lord scorns the scornful, but gives grace to the humble’ (3:34). This is the opposite of worldly wisdom which teaches that the humble get nothing and go nowhere in this world. We often hear it said, ‘I had to fight for everything I have’ or, ‘he was ruthless in winning because there is no glory in losing’. ‘Win at all costs’ is not wisdom from the Bible. The Bible tells us to consider the other person. Sure, we can play or work hard but we must be just and fair (2Tim 2:5). It is the wise not the winners who will inherit glory. The Lord gives grace to the humble not the proud. Grace and love are more valuable that rivers of gold. There is no shame in losing what belongs to this world in order to gain the glory of heaven.

If you don’t remember anything else from this passage, remember verse 34 because both James and the apostle Peter remembered it when they wrote, ‘God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble’ (James 4:6, 1Peter 5:5).

**Above all get wisdom** Proverbs 4

It is said that, ‘Ours may be the first generation in history that did not know how to raise its young’. Is this true? If so, it a tragic indictment upon our generation. Has any other generation in history seen so much rebellion and delinquency amount its young? Yes, all young people rebel to a certain extent, but to actually encourage this is another matter. And what else are parents doing when they fail to discipline their children, when they actually provide alcohol for their teenager’s party, because they will get it anyway, and the pill to their teenage daughter, because ‘she will have sex anyway’. What a defeatist and irresponsible attitude! Why is our generation failing to teach their children wisdom? For a start, they do not listen to the Bible, and secondly, they listen to experts who are intent on replacing God’s wisdom with their own. A sign a Sydney University declared, ‘Unlearn truth’. They want us to get rid of whatever we have been taught by our parents and listen to the experts.

Solomon was not too proud to admit that his father taught him how to live. David taught him to keep the commandments and live (4:4). Solomon then accepted the responsibility of teaching his son to get wisdom. Every generation, apart from ours it seems, has passed its wisdom on to the next generation. The wisdom of our culture was largely obtained from the Bible. Every culture has its wisdom that it passes on from one generation to the next, apart from ours apparently. Do we think that children are born wise? Do we think that, left to themselves, children will work it out? Some are doing this in prison cells and drug rehab centres.

Here in Proverbs chapter 4 we find three sets of instructions given by a father to his son. In the first case it is sons (plural) or children (4:1). Parents have the God-given authority and responsibility to teach their children. It is not the responsibility of the child-care teacher, the school teacher, the minister, or the government to raise your child. It is your responsibility as the parent. These other people can help but they do not have the authority or the responsibility that you as a parent have.

Speaking of help, this is what this chapter is all about. It is wisdom all of us must learn, and having learnt it, pass it on to the next generation. Do not listen to those who think we are evolving upwards when it comes to wisdom. Some have the hope of living much longer lives but what sort of empty lives will they live? The very people who say they will live long lives are the people crying out for assisted suicide to be legalised for young and old. When they think life is no longer worth living death becomes their desire. Wisdom says to choose life.

**1. Get wisdom**

Modern man makes a fundamental mistake in assuming children are born with wisdom. Parents are told not to intrude upon the rights of their child- their right to swear and be violent, their right to get drunk or take drugs, or to have sex before marriage. But the Bible says the child has to be taught how to live. ‘Hear my children, the instruction of a father’ (4:1). Wisdom, like knowledge, has to be taught. Solomon was taught by his father, ‘Keep my commands, and live’ (4:4). He was taught to get wisdom and understanding. So he is teaching his son the same wisdom.

Wisdom does not change because God does not change; nor does the heart of man change. There is no ‘wisdom-gene’. The first lesson of wisdom is that God created everything that exists. The second is that man refused to obey God and was punished with death. Simple truths, simple wisdom, yet wisdom denied by many. The truth of the gospel follows; when we confess our sin we will be forgiven and live. This is the way of wisdom.

We read that wisdom is the principal thing, therefore get wisdom (4:7). One writer refers to the C.V. we prepare when applying for a job. We list all the certificates and awards we have received but fail to say anything about wisdom. We fail to say anything about what our parents taught us concerning how to live. In getting a job in India you have to give the name of your father and where he was born. They know the importance of a father’s instruction. How often is it found out that a man accused of domestic violence grew up in a violent home; the experts get surprised at such information! We know the power of the gospel to change a person’s heart, but we also know the importance of teaching children how to live; the importance of teaching them the fear of the Lord.

Wisdom is personified as ‘lady wisdom’, with the call to value her above all else, to embrace her and exalt her (4:8-9). When you do so you will be exalted yourself; you will receive honour and the crown of glory. Crowns are given to kings and queens, and to those who win the race. Such people are generally honoured by society. It is also true that those who finish the race that is the Christian life will receive a crown of righteousness (2Tim 4:8).

**2. Walk without stumbling**

The apostle Paul speaks of the Christian life being like a soldier focussed on pleasing his commanding officer, and like being in a race in which rules must be obeyed (2Tim 2). Solomon speaks of the path that is life, and another path that leads to death (4:11). We could look to Moses who urged the people to ‘choose life that both you and your descendants may live’ (Deut 30:19). Long life is the gift of wisdom. It is also the promise of the fifth commandment about honouring parents, which is the first commandment with a promise (Eph 6:2). I shudder with fear when I hear children cursing their mother or father. I have no doubt that the Lord sometimes intervenes to cut short the life of some people because God does not speak empty words. Remember, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

In life we face various trials and afflictions, like obstacles in our path. Many stumble on these obstacles, but the promise of wisdom is ‘when you run you will not stumble’ (4:12). Lady wisdom is like a hand both guiding you and holding you up. ‘I have led you in right paths’ (4:11). How often has a word of heavenly wisdom stopped you from saying or doing something you would later regret? The closer you keep wisdom the surer you will be in keeping your foothold in life, ‘for she is your life’ (4:13).

Kidner labels the first set of instructions in this chapter as ‘seek’ and this second set as ‘choose’. We must seek wisdom, and in seeking we will find. We must also choose wisdom, or choose the right path, if we picture life as a race. On the track where I walk the dog each day I found arrows chalked on the road. On weekends they have races and the runners must take note of these arrows if they want to finish the race. What if some wicked person came along and chalked in different arrows. The runner would have to choose which path to take. Young friends, there are plenty of wicked people around trying to steer you down their path, the path of violence and the way of evil (4:14). Wisdom is telling you not to listen to them and not to go down the path of evil.

Listen to what wisdom has to say about the wicked: ‘They eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence’ (4:17). They are addicted to doing evil. They cannot sleep unless they have hurt someone or done some evil. The Psalmist speaks of them plotting evil on their beds (Ps 36:4). They will be on their phones texting friends to join them in sending abusive messages to some innocent person they are attacking. Their diet is wickedness. It is a diet that will make them sick sooner or later, so do not join them.

Verses 18 and 19 continue to speak of the path that is life. These verses are like a summary of the two ways, the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. The righteous do not stumble because they walk in the light. Their path is brightly lit with words of wisdom, words that are like signposts along the way. But the wicked choose to walk in the dark. Not only do they stumble and fall but they cannot see the signposts and will end up in deep trouble (cf. Jer 23:12).

**3. The straight path**

The path of the righteous is a straight path. The teaching of this third set of instructions switches to the actual point of focus as we walk on this path of life. With wisdom we walk in the light. In fact, we have a light to follow, like the wise men following the star to find Jesus. I remember driving where the road was straight for over 50kms. At night you could see the headlights of an oncoming car as it appeared over the horizon, or you could follow the tail lights of a car miles up ahead. We must keep our eyes fixed on wisdom, indeed, upon the Lord himself, if we are to run the race to the end (4:21).

How do we do this? We keep these words, these words of instruction from our father; we keep them in our heart. We write them on our heart, from where they will direct our emotions and our will, our thoughts and our actions. Our whole being, our physical and spiritual well-being, will benefit from walking in this way. Our life will not only be long but it will be a blessing, a blessing to all around us.

Do you know the children’s chorus that tells us to be careful what we see, what we hear, what we say, what we do and where we go? The father similarly instructs his son to watch his mouth and not speak deceitful or perverse things (4:24). He is to keep his eyes looking straight ahead and not start ‘viewing vanity’, as the Psalmist says in Psalm 119 verse 37. There is a lot of vanity for the unwise to view today.

There is no specific mention of your ears, but they are also to be kept from listening to vain and perverse things- things from the mouth of the wicked. Nor is there specific mention of keeping your hands from evil, but there is mention of your feet (4:26). Wisdom tells us to ponder the path of our feet. Remember the warning about following the wicked into shedding innocent blood, ‘for their feet run into evil’ (1:16). And then there was warning about following the wayward woman into her trap.

Keep your foot from evil. Do not turn to the right or the left (4:27). Do not envy the way of the wicked. Do not even look upon evil ways or listen to their enticements. Seek the path of wisdom, choose the path of wisdom, and concentrate on following this path all the days of your life. It is demanding, but also rewarding. It is the only path of life; all other paths lead to death.

**Wisdom about marriage** Proverbs 5

Jesus spoke of his generation as one of unbelief and perversity, an evil and adulterous generation (Mat 17:17, 12:39). What would he say of our generation? Would he not say the same thing? By ‘adulterous’ he was referring to spiritual adultery, to turning from the true God to worship foreign gods. Adultery usually means turning away from your marriage partner to pursue foreign or strange women.

Marriage is God’s creation. God joined Adam and Eve together in marriage before the Fall. Sin has corrupted all man’s relationships including the most intimate on earth, the God- blessed relationship of marriage. The human-human relationship of marriage actually reflects the divine -human relationship, the relationship between Christ and his church (Eph 5). It is therefore obvious, to Satan at least, for Satan to target marriages in his attempt to destroy what God created as good. It is obvious for him to mess with sexuality as he does.

God made man male and female, and told man to leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife in one flesh. What could be more simple and straightforward! But Satan confuses and corrupts everything good. He makes men feel discontented; he stirs up the lusts of the flesh. He leads men into thinking they can improve on God’s design. And so men took additional wives, men like Solomon himself. And so men looked to prostitutes, men like Judah. And so women took to seducing men, as with Potiphar’s wife. And so men took to seducing other men.

Has any generation been more confused and corrupted with regard to sexuality than our own? There have been equals, like Sodom and Gomorrah, like the Benjamite city of Gibeah, and like Rome in the time of Nero. The so-called sexual revolution of the 1970’s promoted free love, divorce, and then abandoned marriage altogether. Marriage has suddenly become popular again, but this time as a perversion with homosexuals! Feminism brought the emancipation of women- supposedly. Women wanted to be like men but some differences could not be erased. In the ongoing confusion sexual harassment has become the new outcry.

Surely it is time to turn to the wisdom of the Bible. Proverbs 5 paints a clear, frank picture of the blessings of sexuality practiced within the confines of marriage between a man and a woman, and the dangers of taking sex outside this divine institution.

**1. Lust**

‘Keeping guard on your lips’ takes on a new meaning in the wisdom the father is teaching his son in this passage. This is the eighth set of instructions so far in the Book of Proverbs. Our lips are used to form words, and it is very easy to say the wrong words, words that are lies, or are foolish or are hurtful. The wise person thinks before speaking; they speak on the basis of knowledge, not from ignorance, or out of arrogance or anger (5:2).

But our lips are also used for kissing. The immoral woman knows the power of a seductive kiss, so the son is told to beware the lips of an immoral or ‘strange’ woman, most probably a married woman. Her lips ‘drip honey’ (5:3). She also uses her lips to sweet talk or flatter the young man with words ‘smoother than oil’. If the young man is wise he will not listen to flattering words; he will not allow a seductive kiss; he will not even venture near the door of her house (5:8).

I once saw a bumper sticker that read, ‘lust not love’. What our society calls love the Bible calls lust- the lust of the flesh. Lust refers to outward or physical beauty; it neglects inner beauty. Outward beauty is part of love; sexual attraction is God’s gift and is appropriate within marriage. Outside marriage it is inappropriate and dangerous. Liaison with an immoral woman or adulteress will end in disaster; in the end it will be as ‘bitter as wormwood’ (5:4). ‘The delicious ends as the disgusting; the soothing as murderous’ writes Kidner. The sweetness ends with a foul aftertaste. The end is like a sharp sword pricking the conscience (5:4). Furthermore, her feet lead down to death, down to hell or Sheol (5:5).

Joseph strenuously avoided the seductive advances of Potiphar’s wife. He knew his life would be in danger if Potiphar found out. But first and foremost he knew it would be a sin against God (Gen 39:9). He knew God’s as yet unwritten command, ‘You shall not commit adultery’. Moses also keep away from the passing pleasures of sin (Heb 11:25). Many today rue an immoral ‘liaison’ when they are sued by an adulterous woman. A well-known businessman was forced to pay millions of dollars to the child of his secret mistress after a very public court case. I think his wife left him in the process.

**2. Lose everything**

The end result of being seduced by an immoral woman is far from pleasant, as just mentioned. The losses far outweigh any ‘passing pleasure’. Wisdom urges caution. Indeed, wisdom says to keep well away from such a woman: ‘Remove your feet far from her’ (5:8). We know the woman is not necessarily the one that initiates adultery, and the teaching here does not accuse the woman. What we have are instructions given to a son. Whether or not he is seduced or is the seducer makes no difference in the end; the end will inevitably be disaster.

Financial loss is only one aspect of this disaster (5:10). There will be other costs like giving your strength to others and your years to being blackmailed (5:9). Precious time and energy as well as money are consumed on what will inevitably come to nothing- ‘nothing’ being the best possible outcome! With spiritual insight and succinct sentences Derek Kidner writes of verses 9-11, ‘The primary thought of these verses is not that loose living invites disease (though verse 11 may well include this), but that it dissipates irrevocably the powers a man has been given to invest’. Kidner wrote before HIV aids appeared, although venereal disease has been around for a long time. Kidner continues, ‘He will wake up to find he has been exploited and his energies consumed’.

Wisdom or instruction despised and rejected in youth will eventually be seen for what it is- wisdom! This foolish individual will come to his senses. He will suffer a guilty conscience. ‘I have not obeyed the voice of my teachers’ (5:13). He will regret not heeding the warning he was given. He will feel shame in the community and especially within his own family circle (5:14). He was ‘on the verge of total ruin’, physical, financial and social ruin.

**3. Love of a wife**

‘Rejoice with the wife of your youth’ is the key verse in the closing words of this set of instructions. This is the antidote, as it were, to being seduced by the immoral woman. Sexual desires are powerful but they can be, and should be, satisfied in the marriage bed. ‘Marriage in honourable among all and the marriage bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge’ (Heb 13:4). “The young man is advised to spend his sexual energy at home, producing children, rather than giving himself to ‘strangers’”.

‘Drink water from your own cistern, and running water from your own well’ (5:15) refers to satisfying sexual thirsts at home. Running water is more thirst quenching that dripping honey! Promiscuity on the other hand is like water down the drain. The KJV translates verse 16 as a positive statement with the meaning that ‘marriage blessings stream out in persons and influences of a true family’ (Kidner). But most translate it as a question to be answered in the negative, which is easier to understand in the context.

The Bible does not portray sex as sinful. These verses explicitly refer to a woman’s beauty- or rather a wife’s beauty. We might compare verses in the Song of Solomon: ‘Your breasts are like twin fawns, twins of a gazelle feeding among the lilies’ (SS 4:5). ‘They portray marital loyalty as an experience of fondness, as well as fertility and fidelity’. Marriage is not simply a business arrangement, or just for procreation; it is for love, sexual love and procreation. It is not just for the purpose of producing an heir as King Henry VIII thought to have the people believe. He was more interested in promiscuity than procreation, more focused on lust than on love.

The teacher closes these verses with a powerful rhetorical question. ‘Why be captivated by an adulteress, why embrace the bosom of another man’s wife? (5:20 NIV). Wisdom teaches that there is no good reason to do so, no reason at all. The commandment teaches the same thing: ‘do not covet your neighbour’s house, do not covet your neighbour’s wife’ (Exod 20:17). Wisdom adds: ‘Do not be seduced by your neighbour’s wife either’.

**4. Lookout**

This subheading can be viewed in two ways. Firstly, the Lord is looking out at all you do, day and night, at home and away. Secondly, you must be looking out for the trap of the adulteress. We have already noted Joseph and Potiphar’s wife. It was not just the danger of being caught and dealt with by an angry husband that kept Joseph from going down the path of adultery. He knew, and he told the seductress, ‘How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God’ (Gen 39:9). All sin is against God, as David admitted in Psalm 51 after he committed adultery with Bathsheba. Remember God’s judgment upon him and the trouble that came to his house after this. His son Ammon lusted after his half-sister and raped her.

The Lord sees and knows every step we take. He is powerful to stop us taking the wrong step, and he often does- but not always. He may respond to the prayer of someone who knows you and your weaknesses. But remember, God never tempts anyone, so if you fall into the trap set by an immoral woman you have only yourself to blame. Jesus actually teaches us to pray, ‘Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil’. You can pray ‘deliver **me** from evil’ if you like. How many young men, and all sorts of men and women, pray this prayer and go off and fall into temptation? As Jesus said, ‘the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak’. So keep praying this prayer but also listen to wisdom. Flee the immoral woman. ‘Flee sexual immorality, for every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body’ (1Cor 6:18).

Let me close with the sobering conclusion of one commentator. “The living waters of covenant loyalty or the fatal chemistry of bitter honey- day by day, year after year, we moderns face that choice with even greater intensity than did the ancients to whom Proverbs was first directed. We have cars; we travel widely; we frequent large cities where anonymity is possible; we have the mechanical or chemical means to avert pregnancy; we live in a society where adultery makes smaller waves than a tiny pebble in a windswept pond. As much as any generation that ever lived, we need open hearts to the teacher’s counsel. Adultery can still be death-dealing -even literally, given the spread of AIDS. Our best choices are still our own partners, with whom we need to keep affections alive, courtships strong, passions kindled. Whatever attracted us to each other in the first place can be recalled and experienced afresh. Water is not sweeter elsewhere nor grass greener. Not as long as God is in heaven and our ways ‘are before the eyes of the Lord’. God has called us to be loyal to each other in order to portray to the whole human family how deathlessly loyal He is to us. Heeding that call or not heeding it has consequences that are nothing less than cosmic”.

**Wisdom on pledges, laziness and sowing discord** Proverbs 6:1-19

Some time ago I heard of a middle -aged couple whose son wanted someone to go guarantor on a loan he was taking from the bank. The parents agreed help their son by allowing him to take a mortgage on the family home. You guessed it! The son failed to keep up repayments on his loan and the parents lost their home!

The teacher here in Proverbs 6 warns against putting up security for your neighbour (6:1). When someone approaches you asking for a loan, how do you respond? We must not be cold or hard- hearted but we must be realistic. Lending money that you know they cannot repay helps no one. When we lived in a poor community we were often asked for a loan, but knowing the person had no capacity to repay, and maybe no intention of repaying, we chose to make a gift rather than a loan.

The teacher tells his son what to do if he has been caught going guarantor on a dodgy loan, or making a promise he cannot keep. He moves on to give a warning to the sluggard or lazy person, and then another warning about the wicked and worthless fellow. This ninth set of instructions concludes with a proverb referred to as a ‘numerical ladder’ which highlights the Lord’s hatred towards ‘one who sows discord among the brethren’ (6:19).

**1. Shake hands with regret**

In the saga of Joseph being sold as a slave into Egypt by his brothers, we read of Judah going surety for the youngest son, Benjamin (Gen 43:9). In this way he convinced the father to let them take Benjamin in a return trip down to Egypt for supplies. Reuben had previously offered to have his two sons killed if he did not bring Benjamin back (Gen 42:37). Judah offered himself to bear the blame forever. In Egypt he pleaded with Joseph to let Benjamin go free, offering to become a slave to Joseph himself. His pleading led to Joseph revealing himself as their brother.

Going guarantor, or shaking hands in pledge, is a serious matter. Promises, even to strangers or ungodly people, must not to be broken. The teacher of wisdom does not consider breaking a promise even when fulfilling it is virtually impossible. A warning not to make rash promises or pledges is implicit, but this is not the teaching of these verses. The teaching is about delivering yourself if you have been caught out by a rash promise or pledge.

‘Go and humble yourself and plead with your friend’ (6:3). Pride must give way to pleading in such circumstances. See how Judah pleaded with his younger brother Joseph- this saga drips with irony in that he did not know it was Joseph at this point in time. But even when Joseph revealed himself Judah and the others fell down before Joseph saying, ‘Behold, we are your servants’ (Gen 50:18).

Do not sleep until you have made this plea and extricated yourself from a foolish pledge (6:4). The teacher compares the predicament of being caught out by a foolish promise to that of a gazelle in the hands of a hunter, and to a bird in the hand of a bird-catcher- they do all they can to escape (6:5). Have you ever noticed what a mother duck does when you approach her? She pretends to be wounded; she stays just in front of you as she limps away from her ducklings with you following. Aggression would put both her and her ducklings in danger. Humility is more effective than ranting and raving, and blaming everyone but yourself, when you are caught up in a promise or pledge you cannot keep.

**2. Scarcity for the sluggard**

We come to some well-known wisdom in the Book of Proverbs. We sometimes hear unbelievers quoting words from the Bible but they have no idea that they are from the Bible. The wisdom in this particular section is directed at someone who is lazy, someone the teacher calls a ‘sluggard’ (6:6). God made us to work; God himself worked six days in creating this universe and on the seventh day he rested (Gen 2:2). In the fourth commandment we are told to work six days and rest on the seventh. After the Fall, work became toil (Gen 3:17-19), but still God commands us to work, and he is powerful to bless the work that we do.

We often see ants marching in single file, carrying heavy loads back to their nest in preparation for winter. They do so without a ‘boss’ ant standing over them. They instinctively know that if they do not work they will starve. To be told to learn from a tiny ant however, is rather insulting. It is worse than being told to learn from a child; Jesus told his disciples to learn from a little child (Mat 18:1-5).

‘If anyone will not work neither shall he eat’ is a command given by the apostle Paul to the NT church (2Thess 3:10). We might wonder what the apostle, or the wisdom teacher here in Proverbs, would have to say about people in our society being paid by the Government when they refuse to work. This is not about those unable to work, or those who cannot find work, but those who think that society or the Government should provide for their needs. Nor is it about being generous or kind to the poor and needy; it is about encouraging laziness.

Listen to what the wise teacher says to the sluggard: ‘How long will you lie there? When will you get up from your bed?’ (6:9). The sluggard replies, ‘a little more sleep, a little more slumber’ (6:10); just a bit more sleep! With this attitude and behaviour what will happen? ‘So shall poverty come upon you like a bandit, and scarcity like an armed man’ (6:11). The lazy person will be reduced to begging.

In the city I noticed a young man lying on the footpath with a hat beside him in which were few coins. He looked perfectly healthy, unless he was mentally ill. Why was he not out working somewhere? I was told of a pastor who kept a pile of bricks in his backyard. When a fit and healthy beggar came knocking on his door he asked him to move the pile of bricks to the other side of the yard before giving him anything.

**3. Sneaky scoundrel**

The teacher not only warns his son about laziness and its outcome; he warns him about the wicked and worthless fellow, and the outcome of his way of life. Lazy people are a burden upon society, but scoundrels or villains are a curse when they ‘sow discord’ (6:14). Lazy people keep a society from prospering, but corrupt people even more so!

The teacher describes this sneaky scoundrel in vivid images. Every part of his corrupt flesh is involved, as well as his corrupt heart. ‘With a hint here, and a wink or gesture there, the trouble-maker can sow discord at will- until God’s hour strikes for him’ (Kidner). His mouth is corrupt, he winks his eyes, he shuffles his feet and points his fingers (6:13). He is clever at spreading rumours as he goes about destroying some innocent person. The word ‘worthless’ translates the Hebrew ‘*beliyal*’, a word also used for the devil (2Cor 6:15). Think of the devil prowling around seeking whom he may devour (1Peter 5:8); this is the picture of the scoundrel portrayed in this passage.

And what is in the heart of this sneaky scoundrel? Perversity! Deceit! His desire is to do evil. He takes pleasure in devising ways to harm other people, and cause dissension within the community. There may be some connection back to the lazy person because the scoundrel hates honest work; he hates the idea of helping other people. He also hates seeing families and communities become more loving and caring. It is dissension and discord that he delights in.

Lest we think this is a common criminal, there are indications of law courts being part of this dissension (6:19). Some people seem to be in court all the time, accusing even innocent people. The character of a very rich woman in our land comes to mind. See the dissension she has sown within her own family after dragging various family members through the court.

In my draw is a copy of a letter from a lawyer which someone in a church sent to another person in the church threatening defamation. This fellow kept his lawyer busy writing such letters, so I was told. I later saw on the TV this fellow was facing court over some corrupt behaviour of his own. The wisdom teacher says, ‘Therefore disaster will overtake him in an instant’ (6:15 NIV). The wise son will have nothing to do with the wicked and worthless people, people intent on sowing discord among family and friends, and even within the assembly of God’s people.

**4. Seven sins**

In the concluding words of this section we find a ‘numerical ladder’ proverb, as mentioned earlier. We find in these verses things that the Lord hates, things that are an abomination to Him (6:16). Because ‘sowing discord among the brethren’, the last thing in this list of abominations, because this is what the scoundrel of the previous verses did, we might see his sudden calamity as divine judgment (6:15). All sin is against God but some sins are more serious and more objectionable to Him. He may choose to administer immediate justice and judgment.

How are we to understand this ‘numerical ladder’ proverb, here in verses 16-19? We find more proverbs like this in chapter 30. The six things, then seven things, are a parallelism, a synonymous parallelism. There are actually seven things, but it is not an exhaustive list. The ‘repetition’ of the parallelism aids memory. There is also this ladder effect, leading up to the last of the things the Lord hates, namely a person who sows discord (6:19); we have already noted the connection back to verse 14.

The list covers sins exposed in the preceding verses of this chapter. It covers things like speech: ‘a lying tongue’ and ‘a false witness who speaks lies’. A false witness suggests a courtroom setting and perjury. Sinful words often lead to sinful actions, like ‘hands that shed innocent blood’, and feet that race to do evil. A society in which murder can be carried out with impunity is indeed a corrupt and depraved society.

Sin, as we know, begins in the heart, and we should know that God sees the heart. So it is that God hates ‘a heart that devises wicked plans’ (6:18). Let not your heart be consumed by bitter or revengeful thoughts. Then there is the proud and haughty look, the first thing in the list (6:17). Pride is the companion of bitterness and revenge. Pride produces the attitude or demeanour that makes enemies rather than friends, and as such is detestable to God.

Someone has commented that this list of things the Lord hates parallels the beatitudes of Matthew 5- in the negative of course! Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’, not the haughty in spirit. In the seventh beatitude we read, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God’ (Mat 5:9). By way of contrast, those who ‘sow discord among the brethren’ are hated by the Lord and will know the curse of God rather than His blessing.

**The trap of adultery** Proverbs 6:20-35

In some countries, including Tonga, shops are closed on Sundays. The people want to obey the Ten Commandments, and the fourth commandment is, ‘Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy’. Yet here in Australia the shops are open and filled with customers on Sundays. Does this mean the commandment does not apply in this country? Because our secular government permits shops to be open on Sunday, does it mean we are free to join the crowd shopping on the Sabbath? It was only a generation back that shops in Australia were closed on Sundays. What changed? God’s command has not changed. It is that it was replaced with man’s command, or the lack thereof.

A generation back we had laws against adultery. We did not have a ‘no-fault’ divorce law before the 1970’s. Society demanded that sex be confined to the marriage bed (Heb 13:4). I remember a friend of mine was obliged to marry his girlfriend after getting her pregnant. Adultery is no longer part of our civil law; does this mean we can disregard the commandment, ‘You shall not commit adultery’? Some in the church think so.

What does the Bible mean when it says, ‘Do not love the world or the things of the world’ (1John 2:15)? Just because the law no longer punishes sin does not mean God no longer punishes sin. Jesus affirmed the Ten Commandments (Mat 5:17). Why do so many in the church think differently? Here is the reason why- love of the world rather than love of God allows free reign for the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (1John 2:16).

We no longer have laws against adultery but we have new laws against rape, paedophilia, pornography, sexual harassment and a whole range of sex crimes. We have the internet in which some 30% of traffic is to access porn websites- websites freely available to children. We have children in primary school being taught sex using material provided by homosexuals. Are we in the most sexually liberated society, as some claim? What is certain is our young people are sexually confused because they are being taught lies rather than truth. Do not be surprised when told that the truth about sexuality is taught in the Bible.

Some of this truth is found here in the Book of Proverbs, in the passage we read today- Proverbs 6:20-35. The first truth is that parents must be committed to teaching their children, the second is that these commands are life-preserving, and thirdly, that the cost of adultery is very high; indeed it is soul destroying.

**1. Committed parents**

The wise teacher tells his son to keep the commands of his father and the law of his mother (6:20). God’s design is for a father and a mother to be raising children. His design is that the parents agree on what they teach their children; this happens when they teach from the same book, namely the Bible. Do you find it difficult to teach your children about sex? If you read passages like this chapter of Proverbs you will find it comes as a natural part of your teaching.

It is not the responsibility of the school to be giving sex education. This is a cop-out for parents. We are seeing the danger of this popular idea, with material contrary to Biblical teaching being promoted in the schools. This said, school is a better place for children to learn than porn websites or social media. Dear parent, it is your responsibility to teach your children. It is not easy but it is necessary, necessary if you want them to be saved.

**2. Commands preserve life**

In the end of course, it is the child’s responsibility to listen and learn from their parents. The son is urged, ‘Bind them [these commands] continually upon your heart; tie them around your neck’ (6:21). Some parents say that one day they will sit their child down and give them ‘the talk’. The Bible does not speak in this way. If we look back at the well-known passage in Deuteronomy 6, a passage that parallels what is written here in Proverbs 6, we find children are to be taught when you sit in the house, when you walk in the way, when you lie down and when you rise up (Deut 6:7).

The other day I was driving with three grandchildren in the car when the eldest, aged eight, asked me if babies go to heaven when they die! I could not tell her to go and ask the minister! So I said that the Bible tells us covenant children, children of a believing parent, are holy so they go to heaven. Moreover, all whom God elects will go to heaven. God is always just. When asked if she believed in Jesus she said ‘yes’, and the little 4yr old joined in saying she believed in Jesus also. There is nothing wrong with sitting down for some specific instruction, but this will not happen if the habit of honest and loving communication has not been established.

‘The commandment is a lamp, and the law a light’ (6:23). We are familiar with this truth from Psalm 119:105: ‘your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path’. Have you memorised this verse? If not, then do so- it may save your life! You, as in a son or daughter, will face challenges and temptations as you grow up and leave home. In some dark moment, or some difficult situation, God’s word will be the light you desperately need to keep you from harm. So as you are taught these truths today do not rebel against instruction. Listen carefully and learn. Take the instruction of your parents to heart because ‘the corrections of discipline are the way of life’ (6:23 NIV)

**3. Cost of adultery**

The teacher is teaching his son but what about his daughter? In this ancient society girls remained at home under the protection of their father until marriage. Sons on the other hand were free to roam. Work often took them away from home. ‘Casual sex’ was not part of that society; sex outside marriage involved either prostitution or adultery, which is what the Bible teaches. In no way is the seductress of these verses seen as a typical woman. She is an immoral woman who the young man is told to avoid. The closing chapter of Proverbs speaks at length about the ‘virtuous wife’.

The commands taught by the parents will keep this young man from the allurements or the ‘sweet talk’ of the adulterous woman- if he obeys them. The parents may well have seen the lives of other young men being destroyed by sexual immorality, and adultery in particular. Have you known such men? We read of them in the popular press- their exploits that is, not their end. These parents understood the power of the ‘sex drive’ as Sigmund Freud called it, but unlike Freud and his followers, they knew how to steer this drive away from danger.

The seductress is a married woman, a wayward wife (6:24NIV). She plasters her face with makeup and ‘sweet-talks’ the young man into her bedroom if he forgets the command of his parents. ‘Do not lust after her beauty in your heart’ (6:25). Lust is really coveting; it is wanting something that belongs to another. In explaining the command, ‘You shall not commit adultery’, Jesus says that to ‘lust for her’ means one has ‘already committed adultery with her in your heart’ (Mat 5:28). Temptation begins in the heart so it is in the heart that it must be stopped. It must be stopped using wisdom; it must be stopped in the fear God. Wisdom is what we read in the following verses, the wisdom of God in contrast to the wisdom of this world. Worldly wisdom says, ‘If it feels good do it, just don’t get caught’; it says nothing about the heart or soul be corrupted- at least until after the event.

In verse 26 a prostitute and an adulteress are compared- and contrasted. A prostitute costs money while an adulterous woman costs your life. Our NKJV translates the Hebrew as the man being reduced to a crust of bread, while the ESV translates, ‘the price of a prostitute is only a loaf of bread’. Either way there is a contrast with adultery, but neither translation condones prostitution in any way. The apostle Paul points out that as believers, our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, so what does it mean if we unite our body with a prostitute (1Cor 6:18). The adulterous relationship may well be ongoing- she ‘will prey upon his precious life’ (6:26). There is another danger also lurking- a jealous husband!

Before this we note two vivid images that come in the form of rhetorical questions. ‘Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned’ (6:27 NIV), and, ‘Can a man walk on hot coals and his feet not be seared?’ (6:28). In today’s idiom we might say ‘Hot sex burns, burns badly!’ Sleeping with the neighbour’s wife can only end in disaster. There will be no escaping punishment, no pleading of innocence (6:29). The Lord will take vengeance against one who defrauds his brother or neighbour in this way (1Thess 4:6, Heb 13:4). Here in Proverbs the young man is also warned of vengeance from a jealous husband and of disgrace within society, an obviously moral society.

Freud likened the sex drive to that of satisfying hunger. He may have read the Bible but obviously did not understand what is written here. He thought he understood the human heart better than our Maker himself. There is a big difference between hunger and stealing a loaf of bread, and lust leading to adultery. Stealing bread even when starving is sin, but people do not despise such a person. When they are found out they must make restitution. Moses writes of four or five-fold restitution (Exod 22:1-2); here it is seven-fold.

The point is that restitution can be made, whereas one who commits adultery cannot make restitution. He ‘destroys his own soul’ (6:32). As Paul writes, he is sinning against his own body, not his bank account (1Cor 6:18; Paul did not write the latter!). You may know that Moses commanded death to adulterer and adulteress alike (Deut 22:22), and that the Pharisees challenged Jesus about this law (John 8:5), but there is no evidence they actually stoned anyone for adultery.

In a morally upright society anyone guilty of adultery is disgraced; they become a social outcast (6:33). It is a measure of the immorality of our society that such behaviour is shrugged off, or simply becomes the topic of gossip. In a society that upholds the sanctity of marriage, and takes the breaking of marriage vows seriously, a husband is expected to love his wife with a jealous love. It was some years ago that the wife of a friend committed adultery. She left the marriage. This friend was very upset and angry at the man who ‘stole’ his wife. One day he met his man and laid a solid blow on him. My friend almost ended up in jail! But wisdom warns the adulterer of a jealous husband’s fury (6:34). He will not be appeased. His vengeance will be fierce and forever, either in the street or in the court room.

In conclusion, remember that even if the jealous husband is ignored by our legal system, the Lord is the avenger and judge of all adulterers. ‘The Lord did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man but God’ (1Thess 4:7-8).

**Seduction of a simpleton** Proverbs 7

Almost every cult leader ends up being embroiled in sexual immorality. They use their power and influence to gather a harem of young women. Sometimes they are seduced by a not-so- young woman as they preach their own moralistic ideas. Too many leaders in the church get caught up in sexual immorality. They fail to heed the commandment, and the wisdom found here in Proverbs. They are compelled to leave their position of leadership; the reason is not always made public. Sometimes clerical immorality is made public, like the report I recently saw in the paper. It read, ‘They [the police] pulled the car over and saw a priest in the company of two prostitutes, drunk with his pants around his ankles’- this was in 1956 in Melbourne. The incident was apparently covered up by the police and the church.

In the proverbs of Solomon the father began instructing his son back in the first chapter. He warned him about two things: corrupt men eager to lead him into evil ways, and the immoral woman. Wisdom taught by the father, wisdom that begins with the fear of God, is the armour needed to protect a young man from the immoral woman- to borrow the imagery of the apostle Paul. Paul tells us to put on the armour of God and stand firm against the wiles of the devil (Eph 6:11). Solomon similarly warns us to arm ourselves, but with wisdom.

Chapter 7 continues to focus on the dangers of the adulteress that we saw at the end of chapter 6. It begins with another exhortation to treasure the father’s commands and write them on your heart, ‘that they may keep you from the immoral woman’ (7:5). Our first point will be ‘sister wisdom’. We will, then look at ‘seduction in action’ in the drama of a simple fellow being seduced. Our third point will be his going ‘to the slaughter’ and finally a closing exhortation, ‘so listen’.

**1. Sister wisdom**

Rather than the metaphorical armour that Paul speaks of, Solomon speaks metaphorically of ‘sister wisdom’ (7:4). ‘Sister’ sometimes refers to a wife but there is no indication that this ‘son’ is married. Marriage, as we have previously noted, in the proper place and the only place for satisfying sexual desires. The picture of ‘sister wisdom’ is that of a close friend and counsellor. Elder sisters especially are often a good source of wisdom. And so wisdom is personified as a sister. In the next two chapters this personification will be developed further.

‘My son, keep my words’ (7:1). This is the eleventh set of instructions here in the opening chapters of Proverbs. The father urges his son to take his commands seriously; to listen and obey because they are life- saving commands. Wisdom is seen as treasure. Every effort must be made to hide wisdom and guard it as something precious. Where is wisdom to be hidden? In the heart! Write these commands ‘on the tablet of your heart’ (7:3). ‘Bind them on your fingers’ also (7:3). Keep your Bible handy and read it every day; stick Bible verses on your wall, but in the end words of wisdom must be committed to memory. They must become our rule of life. The command must take rule in our heart; it must dominate or subdue natural instincts. The difference between animals and humans is that humans are made in the image of God and as such are not ruled by natural instincts. Sin of course, mangled this image of God and corrupted the human heart.

The picture of law as ‘the apple of your eye’ is novel and interesting. The apple of the eye is the pupil, the very sensitive part of the eye that lets in the light. Other references to the apple of the eye refer to God’s eye, and his keeping his eye on his chosen people (Ps 17:8). Here it is the eye of the son, the young man who is told to be wise. Our eye can easily lead us to sin; we know about the lust of the eyes and lust of the flesh (1John 2:16). We know the words of Jesus, ‘if your eye causes you to sin pluck it out’ (Mat 5:29, 18:9). As we will see, the eyes of this young man turned to view vanity (Ps 119:37). He failed to view the world through the lens of wisdom. He failed to keeps God’s law as the apple of his eye. Job made a covenant with his eyes not to gaze lustfully at a young woman (Job 31:1).

It was not only his eyes that led him astray; it was his ears also. Wisdom warned him about the flattering words of the seductress (7:5, cf. 2:16). Flattery works wonders on unstable and gullible young people, and on anyone who lacks wisdom. The devil and his agents, like the seductress, are experts in flattery. We continue to hear of people going on-line and getting taken in by smooth words and promises- only to find that the person behind these words is seducing them. We need wisdom to guard our ears as well as our eyes.

**2. Seductress in action**

The father tells his son a story of a young man he watched from the window of his house: ‘I looked through my lattice’ (7:6). He describes him as simple and lacking understanding because of where he saw him going. The young man walked down the street near ‘her’ corner; he took the path to ‘her’ house (7:8). If you met him he would have said he was free to go where he wanted because ‘all things are lawful for me’ (1Cor 6:12). He saw no danger in going to this place. It seems he met no one because it was evening; it was a very dark night (7:9). He was going to ‘her’ place under cover of darkness, hoping not to be seen. ‘Everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed’ (John 3:20).

Who is this ‘her’ near to whose house this fellow is wandering? It was a woman that he met of course, but it was not his mother or his sister- ‘sister wisdom’ had been left at home! It was a woman dressed like a prostitute, and with crafty intent (7:10 NIV). She was ‘dressed to kill’ as we say, and she would soon have her victim for that night. She would later tell him she was married but for now she gave little away about herself. All she spoke was smooth and flattering words.

Through his window the wise man watched as the woman went to work on this simpleton. First, she grabbed him and smothered him in kisses- it was no kiss on the cheek (7:13). Second, she had a story to reassure him of her ‘good character’. She had paid her vows that very day and had ‘peace offerings’ with her (7:14). She came looking for him that he might share these ‘offerings’ with her. They would enjoy some fine food together. Maybe she knew him, but probably not. She just told him that their meeting was meant to be. She was making out that God, or a god, had orchestrated their meeting. These days she would have said, ‘this is love, how can love be wrong’. The homosexual says, ‘I love him, how can it be wrong’. The paedophile says, ‘I loved the child, how can it be wrong’. Here it is an adulteress more-or-less saying to a simple fellow, ‘I love you, and how can that be wrong’.

Thirdly, the seductress has prepared her bed with beautiful sheets of Egyptian linen. Moreover, sweet and costly perfumes waft through her chambers (7:16, 17). This simple chap may never have slept in such a bed. Here was his chance, and that with a seemingly beautiful woman. Fourthly, the invitation comes- by this stage it is irresistible! ‘Come, let us drink of love till morning’ (7:18). Fifthly, before he can ask if she has a husband like Samson (cf. 6:34) she quietens any fear of being found out by telling him her husband had gone away with lots of money and would not be back until the full moon (7:20). Since it was a very dark night (7:9) it might be a couple of weeks before he returned.

**3. To the slaughter**

So the young man is taken in by the seductress. He yields to her flattery and charm (7:21) - not that he saw his behaviour in this way! His eyes were wide open to sensual pleasures but blind to the consequences. He failed to make wisdom the apple of his eye. He was not like Joseph who in similar circumstances escaped before being trapped. Joseph remembered God and said, ‘How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God’ (Gen 39:9). This simpleton fell into the trap. What would become of him?

The teacher likens this fellow to an ox going to the slaughter (7:22). The ox or cow is called a dumb animal- and for good reason. It walks into a pen at the slaughter house oblivious to the fact that it will soon be a carcass hanging on a rack. Sheep are even dumber- they will run to the slaughter if they see another sheep ahead of them. Comparison to this young simpleton is tragically obvious. ‘He did not know it would cost him his life’ (7:23).

This young man was seduced by the immoral woman, oblivious to the fact that it would cost him his life- was he actually oblivious or did he choose to be so? Was it not the case that he was ignoring wisdom? It would certainly be the case for the ‘son’ being instructed by his father in these verses. He would be without excuse. Yet everyone is without excuse because marriage is a creation ordinance. Adultery, prostitution and all sexual immorality is a case of foolish hearts being darkened and ignoring even ‘natural’ wisdom (Rom 1:32).

**4. So listen**

The story of the simple chap and the seductress ends with him being stricken with a guilty conscience and a ruined life. In the closing four verses of the chapter the father turns to address his son directly, as in the opening verse: ‘So listen to me, my children; pay attention to the words of my mouth’ (7:24). The word ‘children’ points to a wider audience on this occasion.

Turning aside from wisdom into the path of the immoral woman, turning from ‘woman wisdom’ to ‘woman folly’, has been the downfall of many a young person. Woman folly appeals to the senses, to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes. She cleverly sells her wares to unsuspecting and unprepared young people, or anyone who lacks wisdom. Temptation comes to everyone but not everyone succumbs. Those who cling to wisdom are in a position to resist the temptation. Again we think of Joseph.

If we do not resist temptation we will suffer the consequences. The house of the seductress is described as a house near to hell, and her chambers as ‘the chambers of death’ (7:27). ‘Her house is not the grave. It is however, surely the way to it, and the one who takes that way is pathetic indeed. A man’s life is not destroyed in one instant; it is taken from him gradually as he enters into a course of life that will leave him as another victim of the wages of sin’.

**The excellence of wisdom** Proverbs 8:1-31

When someone is hurt in an accident we soon hear the sound of sirens as emergency vehicles race to the scene. Sirens blare as the person with life-threatening injuries is rushed to hospital. Should we not hear the same blaring of sirens when lack of wisdom threatens someone life? Wisdom is a matter of life and death. What about the young man heading for the house of the harlot or the adulteress? Her house, we read, ‘is the way to hell’ (6:27). Who is going to help rescue this fellow from what will destroy his life? Tragically, the life-saving services have been decimated in recent decades; not for lack of money but for lack of commitment to wisdom and truth. The community is no longer ready to listen to wisdom, and sadly, teachers of wisdom, wisdom from the Bible, are hard to find. What is heard is wisdom that is earthly, sensual and demonic (Ja 3:15).

Here in Proverbs 8, Solomon speaks of wisdom crying out at various points across the city; just as he did back in Proverbs 1:20-21. He does not have a father instructing his son as we saw in the previous chapter but personifies wisdom as ‘woman wisdom’ or ‘lady wisdom’. ‘Woman wisdom stands for Yahweh wisdom, and ultimately for Yahweh himself’. We have noted the close parallel between wisdom and law. In this chapter we will see parallels between wisdom and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our first subheading is ‘wisdom is for everyone’. Our second is, ‘wisdom is precious’, and our third, ‘wisdom at creation’. If we have time we will look the promise of blessing to those who listen to wisdom.

**1. Wisdom is for everyone**

All human beings are made in the image of God. Creation is the starting point of wisdom, the creation of human beings in particular. When we read in the Bible, ‘For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ (Rom 3:23) it means every human being without exception. When we read, ‘To you, O men, I call’, as we do here in verse 4, it means every human being. Wisdom cries out in the public domain. Wisdom cries out across the city, on the high hill, along the road, at the city gate and at the door of every home (8:2, 3). Hills are often occupied by religious places, places where people go to worship. People go to these places out of concern for their souls, but very often their souls remain in darkness, or the darkness is increased through unenlightened pagan worship. Wisdom cries out to the worshipper with a message of truth and righteousness. In meeting places like the city gate, and like parliament, and like the law court, wisdom cries out (8:3). Wisdom cries out in every classroom and at the door of every home. Wisdom has a life-saving message, but will this word be heard; that is the question!

Wisdom does not discriminate. Her message is not only for the rich, nor is it only for the poor. It is not just for the educated, nor is it only for the uneducated. Wisdom in a sense speaks to men in the shower, men equal in their nakedness. Hopefully it is heard before they become equal in the grave. She calls out to fools in every walk of life to get understanding, to understand prudence or good judgment. Wisdom calls out to all of us because all of us have the potential to be foolish. We will later be told to seek wisdom (8:17) but here it is wisdom that is out and about seeking to impart understanding to those who lack it.

Wisdom speaks excellent things, things that are right and true (8:6). Every school and business these days is striving for excellence- according to their mission statement! Some churches have also adopted this motto. But what do they mean by ‘excellence’? Is such excellence related to wisdom? Is such excellence focussed on what is right and true, or is it focussed on awards and more funding? Some years ago there was talk of ‘value education’ but whose values? And so the focus keeps moving from the values of one person to the values of another. In striving for excellence there is no agreement as to what excellence looks like. Wisdom speaks of excellent things and tells us what these things are. Wisdom speaks in absolute terms of what is right and what is true. The apostle Paul used this same term, ‘excellence’ when he called for those in Philippi to meditate or think upon things that are ‘noble’; this is the word found in the LXX here in Proverbs 8:6 (Phil 4:8). He included things that are true, just, and pure and lovely, in words that reflect what woman wisdom has to say here in Proverbs 8.

Wisdom is not accepting of everything. Some think they are wise because they accept every idea and every behaviour. But ‘woman wisdom’ does not accept wickedness (8:7). Dishonesty and perversity are an abomination to her. She does not speak in half-truths or innuendo. Everything is plain to him who understands (8:9). Little of what we hear today can be taken at face value. The media is out to sensationalise. The politicians present only the facts that support their policies. Even Christians select only Bible passages that support their doctrines. ‘But there is no hidden agenda and no deception in wisdom’s teachings. Its teachings are in plain view, intelligible to all who have some discernment or who find knowledge’.

**2. Wisdom is precious**

‘Receive my instruction’ says ‘lady wisdom’ (8:10). She cries out across the city to people from the slum to the penthouse suite. All need wisdom even if some, especially the rich, think they are intrinsically wise- as if wealth conveys wisdom! Many think education conveys wisdom, but this is also false. Some even go to celebrities in search of wisdom- only to be disappointed, of course. Wisdom hates pride and arrogance, as we see again in verse 13. Wisdom hates a perverse mouth. Wisdom must be received with humility. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Wisdom must be valued above everything else in life. Silver and gold have been loved by every generation in every nation. When the stock market is uncertain or property prices begin to fall investors run to the safe haven of gold- so I hear. But gold and silver are still risky- they can be stolen. Besides, they do nothing to prolong life. Indeed, worries in keeping such treasure safe my well shorten life! Wisdom is in a class of its own when it comes to life and to living (8:11).

Solomon asked the Lord for wisdom rather than riches, with the result that the Lord gave him both. Wisdom is essential for rulers, to kings and princes and everyone in positions of leadership (8:15, 16). Wisdom is essential for the execution of justice, justice for all. A king who looks out only for himself, or a king who is swayed by every wind of popular opinion will soon fall. A king who denies people justice will soon fall. With wisdom he will be equipped to give counsel and make wise decisions (8:14). If like Solomon he seeks wisdom he will find wisdom; he will find knowledge and discretion to make just decisions. He must also have a hatred for evil- ‘the fear of the Lord is to hate evil, pride and arrogance and the evil way’ (8:13).

Woman wisdom loves those who seek her; she will be found by all who sincerely seek her. She loves those who choose her above everything else that this world offers. She wants to be loved and listened to. She wants to be honoured. As the Lord said to Eli the priest, ‘Those who honour me I will honour’ (1Sam 2:30). Those who seek wisdom and listen to wisdom will find riches and honour are with her (8:18). Wisdom will not disappoint. She will give enduring riches and righteousness, things that cannot be taken away. Lady wisdom promises rich rewards to those who embrace her.

Kings who refuse to embrace ‘lady wisdom’ or wisdom from above and chose to reign in their own wisdom will come to grief. Those who refuse to fear the Lord end up fearing men, fearing for their own position and their own life. Robert Mugabe had to negotiate a personal amnesty because of all the evil he did as president. Other corrupt leaders have had to flee their country. Those who rule by wisdom have no such fears. They are honoured all their days. It is the same with leaders in every institution, including the family home.

Walking with lady wisdom is not a burden, it is a delight. ‘My fruit is better than gold’ she says (8:19). In chapter 3 we read that she is a ‘tree of life to those who take hold of her’. As I read these words and meditated upon them I took a stroll in the garden to pick some ripe, juicy figs. As my mouth delights in this fruit may my soul rejoice in the fruit of the tree of life, fruit that is better than gold. The psalmist sings of the wise man being like a tree that yields fruit in its season, ‘and whatever he does shall prosper’ (Ps 1:2). Lady wisdom will lead you in the way of righteousness and justice. Those who embrace her will lack no good thing; ‘I will fill their treasuries’ (8:21). Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell all he had and follow Jesus and ‘you will have treasure in heaven’ (Luke 18:22). Wisdom says this also. Let us remember that all our achievements and all our prosperity comes for the Lord. We deserve nothing, and in our own strength we achieve nothing of eternal value. But the Lord offers life, ‘abundant life’ (John 10:10). Jesus promises abundance in this present life, and in the age to come eternal life (Luke 18:30).

**3. Wisdom at creation**

Wisdom cries out in the streets. She calls out to be heard by men and women in every part of the land. But on what basis does she demand to be heard. What are her credentials? Men give themselves all sorts of titles and demand to be heard on this basis. Woman wisdom has no such title; she has a much more impressive claim. In the world of religions the demand to be heard is often based on antiquity but none make the claim of woman wisdom. She in effect answers, ‘I trace my beginnings and my authority back to the Lord, Yahweh’. She says, ‘The Lord possessed me at the very beginning of his way, before his works of old’ (8:22). She claims to have been around when God created the world. She is beyond being ancient, she is everlasting!

Lady wisdom claims to have been ‘possessed by the Lord at the beginning of his way’ (8:22). Back in Proverbs 3:19 it is written that, ‘The Lord by wisdom founded the earth’. Wisdom seems like an attribute of God but here wisdom is personified- wisdom speaks of the Lord and many other things. This has led to some identifying wisdom with Christ. Certainly there are parallels, and the NT speaks of Christ being wisdom from God (1Cor 1:30, Col 2:3), but personification is not the same as an actual heavenly being. The word ‘possessed’ has been translated as ‘created’, and then used by Arians to argue that Christ was created by God. In this way they deny the holy Trinity. They will not agree with the words of the Nicaean creed, ‘begotten, and not made’. The only Bible I found with the translation ‘created’ is the discredited NEB. ‘Possessed’ is the best translation, with the understanding of ‘getting’ or being possessed by birth. Christ is ‘brought forth’ as the only begotten Son of God but not part of God’s creation.

The point is that wisdom was with God and assisted him in the creation of all that exists- ‘I was beside him as a master craftsmen’ (8:30). Wisdom was there at the beginning, established from everlasting, from before the earth existed, from before the waters were separated and the mountains came forth- note the similarity with Genesis 1. The circle on the face of the deep points to a spherical planet (8:27). Telling the sea where to stop was something that impressed the ancients (8:29, Jer 5:22, Ps 104:9), and something that should impress us in the face of fears about rising sea levels.

No man was there when God created the heavens and the earthy so we should be humble in our claims to know how everything works. We should not be like those who make up stories about gods fighting for mastery over the universe, or stories like a Big Bang and evolution. We should accept what God tells us. We should worship God and not the creation. Like lady wisdom, we can delight in the Lord, ‘rejoicing always before him’ (8:30). She also delights in the ‘sons of men’, as in human beings created by God in his image. And we should rejoice in God also, and in this wisdom that is still available to us.

Jesus was also with God in the beginning. John refers to Jesus as the ‘logos’, the word of God. This was a Greek concept but we note the parallels with the Hebrew teaching of woman wisdom; ‘in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God’ (John 1:1). Paul picks up on this when he speaks of the supremacy of Christ in Colossians 1:15-17- ‘by him all things were created that are in in heaven and that are on the earth’. And in Hebrews 1 we find similar truths concerning Christ; ‘through whom he made the worlds’. The supremacy of Christ means he is not created but is the eternal Son of God who was with God when he made the universe, and is with God now ready to draw his creation to a close through divine judgment and destruction.

**Choose life** Proverbs 8:32-36

‘Can a man take fire to his bosom, and his clothes not get burned?’ (6:27). A major part of wisdom in these opening chapters of Proverbs has been a father warning his son about the immoral woman. You might have become a little weary of hearing such wisdom but recent events in federal parliament show that such wisdom still needs to be heard. The politician involved has expressed deep regret at his ‘affair’. I have not heard him admit that he was a fool, but that is what the father would say to his son here in Proverbs. This man’s wife and children have been betrayed, and his career is threatened. ‘Can a man take fire into his bosom and his clothes not get burned?’

In the case of this politician, and of many others, there is a tragic disconnect between religion and life, even faith and life. There is an old country song by Harlan Howard called, ‘Sunday morning Christian’. It pulls no punches when it comes to the man who dresses up for church on Sunday morning and sings louder than the rest, but on Monday morning joins the rat race. He goes back to, ‘Gougin, kickin, cheatin, shovin, with no thought of God or lovin’. We are reminded of the other teaching the father gives his son about getting involved with sinners, with greedy gain and acts of violence. Some people go to church on Saturday night so they can go to ‘the game’ on Sunday. Some skip church altogether, which appears better than playing the hypocrite.

What is the point of going to worship and hearing the word of God when it has no impact on your life? You may deceive yourself and others but you cannot deceive God. Besides, why leave the blessings behind when there are rich blessings to be had in listening and obeying the word of God. Our wisdom teacher speaks of ‘wronging or harming your own soul’ (8:26). Some go to church every Sunday and then go home to the unhappiest house in the street. Does this not point some disconnect between faith and life? Wisdom says, ‘listen to me and you will be blessed’. If there is no blessing we conclude that there is little or no listening to wisdom.

Young people often taunt one another with the words, ‘Get a life’. This is the ultimate insult for those who have nothing better to say, those caught up in seemingly trivial matters. It implies that the speaker is having a great life. There is a difference of course, between life and living, between a meaningful and enjoyable life and simply existing. Wisdom offers life, life that is worth living. She delights in men, and men delight in her (8:31). When faith and living are connected we find life, abundant life. Wisdom is that connection; in fact, ‘wisdom, life and the Lord are linked inextricably together’. ‘Get a life’ is actually the cry of wisdom, not a taunt for young people to use. Wisdom tells the speaker, as well as the hearer, it tells young and old alike around this world to, ‘Get a life’.

In the few verses before us today we come to the twelfth and final instruction passage, and as such a summary of wisdom’s teaching. It comes from the mouth of wisdom herself; it is addressed to ‘my sons’ (8:32). The next chapter lays out the choice between ‘lady wisdom’ and ‘lady folly’. This instruction is also about choice, the choice between life and death. More than physical life and death is involved in this choice- although far too many young people are choosing physical death.

Life is about fearing the Lord and getting wisdom. The fear of the Lord, not other people or things in this world, is the beginning or essence of wisdom. It is about quality of life, although length of days is part of wisdom’s promise (3:2, 4:10, 9:11). Does wisdom also teach about life after death? (cf. 12:28). In Psalm 16:11 the path of life leads beyond the grave. Jesus says that to ‘know the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he sent, is eternal life’ (John 17:3).

We will look at this profound teaching about wisdom and life under three subheadings: listen, blessing and life.

**1. Listen**

When Jesus spoke in parables he concluded, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear! (Mat 13:9). We all have ears but do we use them to hear- as in hear wise teaching. Most of our listening is to our own voices. We hear others talking but do we listen? Jesus was a great listener. He heard the voice of the poor, and of children. Do we listen to such voices? Jesus had no need to listen to wisdom because he is the embodiment of wisdom; but we cannot say this of ourselves. Only a fool thinks he is all wise and has no need to learn more wisdom.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; note the word ‘beginning’ (9:10). We do not inherit wisdom. We must listen and learn wisdom. This is the call that we hear in the Book of Proverbs. It is an urgent call, a call to which we dare not turn a deaf ear. We know people who are physically deaf; we categorise such people as being hearing impaired. But the Lord makes a different categorisation; he sees those who hear wisdom, and those who are deaf to wisdom. It is those who disdain or ignore wisdom who are in danger (8:33). This wisdom is spoken of as instruction, the very instruction we find in these verses, and in all the Bible, the inspired and infallible word of God.

Wisdom established her credentials earlier in this chapter. She was there when the Lord was creating the heavens and the earth. She has been established from everlasting. She knows our frame. She knows our weaknesses- do we have any strengths? It is interesting to hear what people say when asked to list some of their weakness, as sometimes happens in a job interview. ‘My weakness is that I am a perfectionist’ some say, or ‘my weakness is my obsession with being punctual’. Sin, expressed in pride, prevents us from seeing our weaknesses, but God’s words and God’s wisdom will give a true picture of your heart- and that for free! The diagnosis is free and the treatment is free also; all it costs is your pride! Stop and listen to the voice of wisdom before it is too late.

**2. Blessing**

Our ears suddenly open when we hear the word ‘blessing’ or ‘happy’ because we think we are getting some material blessing. We think such ‘things’ will make us happy. The child saw a toy in the shop as we walked past. It was a toy that would make her really happy. So I got the toy for her and she was very happy- for the rest of the day! Life without wisdom is about short term happiness- fixes if you will. Those addicted to drugs must have their fixes. Those addicted to material things and consumerism must have their fix also- a new pair of shoes or a new gadget that makes them happy- for a short time!

The blessings spoken of here, and the blessings spoken of by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, are not material blessings. They are spiritual blessings, blessings upon our heart. ‘One’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions’ (Luke 12:15). How many are listening to such wisdom today? These are the words of Jesus, the Son of God and wisdom from God. This blessing comes from listening to wisdom, from ‘active listening’ to what ‘lady wisdom’ has to say.

Wisdom cries out across the city and at every door (8:3). The wise son will be standing at his door daily, ready to listen (8:34). The wise person will open their Bible daily and read ‘wisdom from above’, wisdom that is ‘pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy’ (James 3:17). These are the blessings of wisdom. These are the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22).

‘Lady wisdom’ knew delight and joy in the presence of the Lord at the time of creation (8:30). She delights in men and women who listen to her and keep her ways (8: 31, 32). ‘Joy-bringing success is what she promises’. Blessing refers to whole of life well-being. It comes from total commitment to wisdom, or, in terms of the ‘greater Wisdom’, it comes from following Christ.

**3. Life**

The last two verses of this chapter form a unit- the first line of verse 35 matches the last line of verse 36. ‘For whoever finds me [wisdom] finds life’, but ‘all those who hate me love death’. The choice is clear: life or death. There is no in-between! Despite this clear, black and white choice, lots of people still sit on the fence as it were. They will not admit to hating wisdom or the Bible but they will not embrace wisdom and the Bible either. Tell them what Jesus said about, ‘he who is not with me is against me’ (Mat 12:30) and still they tell you they are neutral, neither this nor that.

If you are not following Jesus, dear friend, make no mistake, you are following the devil. You may think you have a life but you don’t. The froth and bubble you live in is fast evaporating. The stench of death will soon take over. People are surprised to see coffins on sale in one of our big supermarkets, but in Kenya I saw men making coffins right outside the hospital. I also saw them spraying fly repellent and perfume on the coffin at a funeral. How can anyone love death! But this is what many choose. They are dead even before being put in a coffin. The day they rejected wisdom, the day they rejected Jesus Christ, they chose death. Wisdom, like the prophets, cries out, ‘Choose life!’

The lines enclosed by these references to life and death refer to ‘favour from the Lord’ and ‘sins against wisdom’ (8:35, 36). The Lord was spoken of back in verse 22 as the everlasting creator. Here the Lord grants favour and blessing upon those who find or choose life. It is the majestic and mighty creator and sustainer of the universe who individually blesses those who embrace wisdom and those who believe in his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. ‘He who has the Son has life; but he who does not have the Son of God does not have life’ (1John 5:12). Could the choice before us be presented with any greater clarity?

Joshua made it clear to the people of Israel: ‘Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve… as for me and my house we will serve the Lord’ (Josh 24:15). Do not think that by confusing this matter in some way you will escape divine judgment. There are no ‘ifs’ or ‘buts’ in what we read here. A jury is compelled to make a decision: guilty or not guilty. They often do this on evidence that is less compelling than what we find here with wisdom. ‘Lady wisdom’ gave her credentials- she was with the Lord at the time of creation.

Jesus Christ who is ‘greater Wisdom’ was with God at the time of creation. He is the eternal Son of God whom God sent into this world as witness to the truth. His mighty works testify to the truth of his words. His death and resurrection testify to the truth of his words. If you do not listen and believe, you sin. You miss the mark (8:36), you fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). In doing so you harm your own soul. Whether you mean to or not, failing to listen to these words means you are writing your own death certificate. Your epitaph will read, ‘Here lies a fool who rejected wisdom, a person who chose death rather than life’.

**Two ways** Proverbs 9

Compulsory voting means you have to go to a polling booth to cast your vote. The one thing I hate about this is the people lining the path into the polling booth, thrusting how-to-vote brochures in my face. Mostly there are two major parties crying out for my vote. As you enter school or college, as you enter a workplace or a new community, you also come across opposing voices calling you to go this way or that way. Indeed, in the progress of life itself, voices cry out to us: ‘cast your lot in with me’ or ‘follow me’ they say. One voice is that of ‘lady wisdom’ and the other that of ‘lady folly’.

‘Two ways to live’ is the title of a well-known evangelistic tract. Our title is simply two ways. That tract presents the gospel as the way God wants us to live. The other way ignores God to follow our own way. There is a parallel to the extent that our own way is the way of sin and death. Jesus spoke of the broad way that leads to destruction- broad because many choose this way. Then there is the narrow way, the way that leads to life- narrow because few find it (Mat 7: 13, 14). Jesus may have reflected on the way of wisdom, and the way of folly, as set forth in this chapter of Proverbs.

This is the last chapter of these opening chapters of Proverbs. It is a chapter of ‘bold succinctness and vivid personification’. Solomon previously wrote as a father instructing his son. He also personifies wisdom as seen in this chapter; he personifies wisdom and folly. We see ‘lady wisdom’ and ‘lady folly’ making a final pitch to ‘whoever is simple’, to the man in the street searching for meaning to life, a man or a woman choosing the way they will live. In between these two ‘sales pitches’ are some words of wisdom about correcting a scoffer or mocker, and a reminder of the foundation and fruits of wisdom.

**1. Wisdom’s way is life**

‘Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn out its seven pillars’ (9:1). Like the virtuous wife of Proverbs 31, wisdom has been busy building her house, and a fine house it is with seven pillars adorning it; we might call it a mansion. Since seven is the number of days of creation, the seven pillars may have a cosmic allusion. On the other hand, seven symbolises perfection. Woman wisdom is not sitting at her door like lady folly (cf.9:14). She has been busy preparing a feast, cutting the meat, mixing the wine and laying out the table. All is ready for her guests.

David sang of the Lord preparing a table for him in Psalm 23. Isaiah called for those who hunger and thirst to come and eat: ‘let your soul delight itself in abundance’ (Isa 55:2). The apostle John speaks of the marriage supper of the Lamb when picturing heaven (Rev 19:7, 9). Jesus told a kingdom-of-heaven parable about a wedding feast (Mat 22). When the feast was ready the king sent servants telling the invited guests to come. When they failed to come he brought people in from the highways and byways.

‘Woman wisdom’ sent maidens to cry out from the highest places across the city. ‘Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!’ (9:4). She urges the simple people, people who lack understanding or good sense, to come to the banquet. She has meat and bread, and wine that she has mixed. Rich nourishing food will satisfy body and soul. Those who come to her will not lack any good thing. Jesus called himself the bread of life, saying, ‘He who comes to me will never hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst’ (John 6:35). Yet again we see a parallel between ‘woman wisdom’ and the ‘greater Wisdom’, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Our souls need nourishing just like our bodies- this is the message of wisdom. It is wisdom tragically neglected by many in our city today. While new eating places are opening almost daily, churches are closing. People are more concerned for their stomach than they are for their soul (Phil 3:19). ‘Woman wisdom’ cries out to such simple people, to the common man, saying, ‘come in here and find food that satisfies, food that nourishes your soul, not just your body’.

In her after-dinner talk ‘woman wisdom’ urges her guests to ‘forsake foolishness’, or ‘foolish friends’ as some translate. There are lots of simple folk at her table, but no fools. They are men and women who listened to the voice of wisdom and entered her house. They are blessed with good food and fellowship, and now with wise teaching. Follow the way of understanding, of wisdom and truth and you will live. Life is offered as a gift to those with understanding, those who will humbly receive it. This feast represents ‘a changed pattern of life in new company’ (Kidner).

**2. Reception of correction**

Before we hear the words of ‘lady folly’ from the other side of the street as it were, we have some words that seem to be addressed to the teacher of wisdom. This teacher is warned not to try correcting a scoffer or mocker, a person hardened against wisdom (9:7, 8). If he does he must be ready for a fierce rejection. The scoffer will not listen to the message but he will turn upon the messenger.

Christians make up only 2% of the Indian population, yet they subjected to vicious attacks, including beating and burning of churches. This tiny group of people are targeted by the pagan majority, or some in this majority, who hate the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our society has a higher percentage of Christians but preachers of the gospel also face vicious attacks in our society. Attackers are usually hardened mockers who have rejected the truth; they desperately want to stop others hearing the truth. They want to stop public prayer and have even tried to stop school kids from talking to their friends about Jesus.

Timothy Keller shares an interesting quote: ‘Many young adults are unreligious and relativistic, insisting that every person has a right to create their own moral values, and no one can tell them how to live. Yet they have deep moral convictions against racism and sexism that they insist are true for everyone’. We are also told that without question the greatest moral challenge of our generation is climate change!

‘Do not correct a scoffer lest he hate you’ (9:8). The quickest way to lose a friend or see someone leave the church is to offer them advice- if they are not a person of wisdom that is. If they are wise they will listen and respect you; they will ‘love you’ rather than ‘hate you’. I am reminded of my attempt to pat a zebra many years ago. Such handsome creatures, and so docile looking as they quietly graze. I decide to go up and pat this zebra. As I did so my friend yelled at me to stop. He saw the animal start to turn around and knew how dangerous the kick of this animal was. Wow! Did I cop it on one occasion when I commented on the prayer of a lay preacher! So watch out when offering advice to a scoffer or a wicked person. You will get slammed with abuse and worse.

In contrast to the scoffer, the wise person will accept rebuke or correction. He will accept it with appreciation because, ‘give instruction to a wise man he will be still wiser’ (9:9). The wise man, no matter his age or education, understands that he can always grow in wisdom, as well as in knowledge. Only a fool thinks he knows everything about everything. Only a fool rejects loving correction, be it from a spouse, a friend or even a child. How many of us have faced correction from a child?

Jesus used a child to teach his disciples wisdom; they were foolishly arguing about greatness in the kingdom of heaven (Mat 18:1, 2). Jesus also laid out the principle, ‘whosoever has shall be given more’ (Mat 13:12-16). He warned his disciples against casting their pearls before swine (Mat 7:6). Reject advice and you will not be offered it again- and you will be the loser. Perverse Jews at Thessalonica rejected the preaching of the apostle Paul outright and attacked him, while those at Berea carefully considered what he preached in the light of Scripture (Acts 17).

**3. Foundation and fruit of wisdom**

In the first chapter we read, ‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction’ (1:7). This truth, this truth about the foundation of wisdom, is repeated here in the closing chapter of this first section of Proverbs. Wisdom is not found in the heart of man because, ‘the heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked’ (Jer 17:9). Wisdom comes from God, and it comes only to those who humble themselves before the Lord, and who fear the Lord and shun evil. The parallel line of verse 10 refers to knowledge, not general knowledge or ‘Google’ knowledge but knowledge of the Holy One, a term that is plural, but by virtue of the parallelism clearly refers to God. God, wisdom and life are inextricably linked.

Wisdom rewards hearers with length of days, ‘and years of life will be added to you’ (9:11). We have seen this and discussed it previously (3:2, 16). Length of days, peaceful and prosperous days, are among wisdom’s rewards. Not just long life but a fruitful life is the focus. Is there any suggestion of life beyond the grave? In the NT, followers of Jesus are promised everlasting life, again with the promise of fruitfulness in terms of worshipping the Holy One in the community of glorified saints for ever and ever.

‘If you are wise, you are wise for yourself, and if you scoff, you will bear to alone’ (9:12). The student or son is spoken to directly. He is made aware that he, and he alone, is responsible for the choice he makes, and the consequences that follow. If you choose wisdom you reap personal rewards. If you choose to be a scoffer you will suffer the consequences, and you will do so alone. Blaming parents, teachers, politicians, preachers or whoever, will come to nothing in the end. You will face the consequences of your life choice, ultimately divine judgment, alone.

**4. Folly’s fatal invitation**

The interlude is over. We are back on the street where the simpleton is strolling, except now we are on the other side of the road. We hear ‘lady folly’ ignorantly screaming out to those who pass by (9:13). She is sitting at the door of her house which is on the high side of town. Pagan shines were usually on the highest hill around. There is no reference to her building this house- maybe she just took it over like the cuckoo bird! She sits at the door like a harlot, calling for ‘whoever is simple to turn in here’ (9:16). This simpleton has received an invitation from ‘woman wisdom’ to come to her banquet. Now he hears the raucous cry of ‘lady folly’.

What does ‘lady folly’ promise? ‘Stolen water is sweet and bread eaten in secret is pleasant’ (9:17). Stolen water ‘probably echoes the allegory of 5:12-23 where water and fountain describe love making between husband and wife’. Such is the nature of a foolish, fallen heart that it delights in what is evil rather than what is good, in what is stolen, what is immoral, what is vile, whatever opposes wisdom and God (Rom 1:32).

But the final word is of death and hell. ‘He does not know that the dead are there’ (9:18). In the house of ‘lady folly’ he will be dining with the dead, the morally and spiritually dead. They will enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season, a short season. The wages of sin may be paid sooner than they expect. They will, of course, be paid in full when the guests of ‘lady folly’ find themselves in the depths of hell (9:18).

Again we turn to the NT and the words of Jesus to confirm wisdom. ‘Take him away and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’ (Mat 22:13). And in Revelation 20:15: ‘Anyone not found in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire’. So, in the words of Moses, and the words of wisdom, ‘I have set before your life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life that both you and your descendants may live’ (Deut 30:19).

**Wealth is worthless on the day of wrath** Proverbs- on money

In the first nine chapters of Proverbs wisdom was taught through instructions given by a father to his son. We also heard wisdom taught through the personification of wisdom and folly. The son was told to stay away from the immoral woman; we found teaching about sex, marriage and adultery. We will find more wisdom on these subjects in the following chapters. The son was also told to stay away from wicked and violent men, men ‘greedy for gain’ (1:19). Recent events in Federal Parliament show that wisdom about the immoral woman is still needed. It was not long ago that another man lost his seat parliament for taking what amounted to a bribe.

News about people getting scammed on the internet keeps coming. Nigerian money scams have been around for some time, but people continue to succumb to the promise of riches. In 2017 alone almost 1300 people reported being scammed, for total of over $1.6m. How many were not reported? Do they not hear the warnings or do they choose to ignore them? We also see people putting their life savings into too-good-to-be-true investments, and then losing everything. Some people talk about common sense but such sense does not seem that common! The Bible, and particularly Proverbs, has a good deal to say about money or wealth, so let us listen and learn.

In Proverbs 10 we find the title, ‘The proverbs of Solomon’ (10:1). Solomon is still the writer but the genre changes. We still have short, pithy, two-line statements (parallelisms) but now they come as independent and seemingly random units. Most verses are not related to surrounding verses, although some students try to locate cohesive units in these chapters; namely chapters 10-24. Chapters 25-29 form another collection of random proverbs, while in chapters 30 and 31 we do find cohesive units.

Most students opt for a subject or category approach to these chapters in Proverbs. I listed about fourteen subjects as I went through trying to place each proverb within a category. Others have suggested eight or sixteen categories (Kidner and Farmer respectively). Tim Keller in a recent devotional book on wisdom includes around thirteen categories, while telling us that ‘readers should expect that some proverbs recur in more than one daily reading’. This is because they teach on more than one subject. The NKJV Study Bible has a detailed list of subjects and associated proverbs that goes for six pages!

Today we will start with the subject of money or wealth. We will have a ‘money talk’ from a Biblical perspective. In an essay I wrote on wealth and poverty in Proverbs, I referred to the farmer in Luke 12 who hoarded his grain in bigger barns, and to the warning against ‘heaping up treasure’ in James 5. The marker made the usual comment, ‘But how much is enough?’ Let us see what the Book of Proverbs has to say on this matter.

**1. The benefits of wealth**

Wealth *per se* is not condemned in Proverbs or in the Bible; it is one’s attitude that concerns the Lord. In fact, half of the times the word wealth is used in Proverbs we are told to prize it. In the other half we are told not to trust it. ‘The rich man’s wealth is his strong city; the destruction of the poor is their poverty’ (10:15). Wealth brings security as well as social recognition and power (22:7, 19:4).

Wealth may well be the blessing of the Lord, his blessing upon hard, honest work (10:22). Back in chapter 3 we read of the Lord filling your barns with plenty when you honour him with your wealth (3:9-10). It is not a sin to be rich. Solomon himself was a rich man; his downfall was not his riches. Abraham was a rich man, as was Job. Job was reduced to poverty, through no fault of his own. Even so, the story of Job reminds us that our ultimate security does not come from riches.

There are rich men today who are true Christians, men who have worked with honesty and integrity, men who have not indulged in worldly pleasure but have been generous towards the needy. As they have been blessed by the Lord so they have been a blessing to others (28:27). They may be rare, but they are there! Many others have allowed riches, or the search for riches, to distract and divert them from the way of the Lord. They have come to trust in their wealth rather than in the Lord (3:5). Is this not what we see in our society?

**2. The pitfalls of wealth**

‘Woman wisdom’ made it clear that ‘wisdom is better than’ wealth (8:11), and that ‘riches and honour are with her’ (8:18). Wealth without wisdom is dangerous- a little with the fear of the Lord is better (15:16, 16:8). When wealth is honoured above wisdom itself or above the Lord it is a danger to one’s life. ‘Wealth is good as long as it does not become your *summum bonum*- your greatest good’. Trusting in riches makes us blind to matters beyond the grave, matters of eternity. Only a fool thinks he can take his wealth with him when he dies (Eccl 5:15, Psalm 49:17). What does that say about the Pharaoh’s of ancient Egypt? But at least they believed in some form of life after the grave, which is more than many in our modern society. ‘Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath’ (11:4 NIV), the day of wrath referring to death and divine judgment, a truth that is not totally absent from the Books of Proverbs (see 12:28, 14:32).

Wealth can be fleeting; it can takes wings and fly (23:5). Jesus spoke about treasures on earth being vulnerable to moth and rust and theft (Mat 6:19). As wealth increases so do worries. The rich man who trusts in his riches is an anxious man (Eccl 5:12). ‘A man’s riches may ransom his life; but a poor man hears no threat’ (13:8 NIV). Kidnappers target rich men when they want ransom money. The lives of many were destroyed, some literally, in the global financial crisis of 2008. The life of the poor was barely affected.

It is not just kidnappers that bother a rich man- he has many ‘friends’ (14:20). Lots of people want to be friends with a rich man, not because they love him but because they love his money. The prodigal son had lots of ‘friends’, until his money ran out. People in India perceived that the missionary from Japan was rich and wanted to be his friend. It wasn’t long before they were asking him to bring them a gadget from Japan.

**3. How wealth is gained**

Bill Gates is reported to have told his children that they will not inherit his abundant wealth. He is looking after his children but reckons that inherited wealth can be harmful. If he has not found such wisdom in the Bible (20:21) he has found it by observation. I watched a documentary about a rich family in California. Money was this man’s god. His two boys grew up with their father buying them everything they wanted, and buying them out of every trouble they encountered. They got bored with the rich life and turned to a life of petty crime, and still the father bought them their freedom- for a time. Greed led to divorce and in the end the two boys killed their father. They were telling their story from prison. It was a tragic story, one Gates hopes to avoid.

Inherited wealth or windfall wealth is often squandered on wild living, as with the prodigal son; not all come to their senses as he did (21:20). The person who earns money through honest work learns wisdom at the same time. ‘He who gathers little by little will increase it’ whereas ‘wealthy gained hastily will dwindle’ (13:11 ESV). Through labour a person learns self-control, wise management and the virtue of delayed gratification. Things gained by work and saving are valued and appreciated, unlike the impulse purchase. Of the thousands who buy lottery tickets a few win the jackpot. The thousands are greedy for gain and as such are fools. Gambled money is money lost to family or diverted from wise investment. The jackpot winner is also a fool because it can be observed that, ‘A fool and his money are soon parted’. Shame on our governments, and other organisations, for promoting lotteries or raffles as a way of raising money. They bring many lives to ruin through this evil.

Apart from windfalls, wealth is often gained through dishonest and corrupt practices. ‘The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil’ (1Tim 6:10). ‘Dishonest scales are an abomination to the Lord’ (11:1, 20:10, 23). In India many goods were sold using simple balances. It was disconcerting to see rocks being used as counter weights because the standard weights ‘had been lost’. But it was worse to see fingers being stuck under the tray. Thankfully we have regulators checking measurements, although they often find ‘irregularities’. Bribery is another corrupt business practice that the Lord hates (15:27, 17:23). Bribery perverts the course of justice, including justice in business. In many countries it is almost impossible to do business without bribing corrupt officials. It is a danger to our society, as a recent report has shown. Lobbying politicians for favours can easily degenerate into bribery and corruption. Wealth is often gained by lying or deception. ‘Getting treasures by a lying tongue, is the fleeting fantasy of those who seek death’ (21:6). Lying to the tax man, as occurs in multinational companies and with the casual labourer, is all too common as a way of gaining wealth. The lie may be little in your eyes but it is big in the eyes of the Lord.

Failing to pay proper wages is also common, and is condemned by the Lord (James 5:4); as is the charging of exorbitant interest rates on loans. A lot of wealth is gained by oppressing the poor, but wisdom says, ‘He who oppress the poor reproaches his Maker’ (14:31), and he will ‘surely come into poverty’ (22:16). We also read, ‘He who amasses wealth by exorbitant interest amasses it for another who will be kind to the poor’ (28:8 NIV). Again, such ways of getting rich are most obvious in other societies, but we could ask about the interest rates being charged on credit cards and the huge salaries being paid to company executives.

The list of deceptive practices by which men make money is long, but another one is noted in Proverbs 11:26. If there was a sugar shortage in India traders would hoard sugar so as to later sell it at a high price, thereby depriving people of this basic product. ‘The people will curse him who withholds grain’ (11:26). We often hear about markets being distorted. Another ruthless practice involves talking down the value of an item being sold and then revealing its real value after you purchase it (20:14). A buyer bidding on a house for example will grumble about its flaws but when he gets the property he boasts.

What the Lord loves to see, what he honours, and what he rewards, is money being earned by honest hard work. Diligent hands bring wealth because the Lord blesses the labour of diligent hands and honest hearts (10:4b, 27:23-27). ‘Humility and the fear of the Lord bring wealth, honour and life’ (22:4 NIV). While we applaud honest hard we do not applaud the workaholic, the person who wears himself out to get rich (23:4). We must do our work ‘unto the Lord’, acknowledging that it is the Lord who blesses our work. It is the Lord who sends the rain and gives the harvest when the hard working farmer has planted and weeded his crop. It is the Lord who grants health and strength to do the work he gives you to do.

**4. How wealth is used**

The Lord is not only concerned with how wealth is gained; he is also concerned with how it is used. He is concerned with your attitude towards wealth. ‘Honour the Lord with your wealth’ (3:9, 10). Give to the Lord and he will give to you (Luke 6:38). Giving to the poor is like giving to the Lord (19:17). Spending on things like gambling or prostitutes is prohibited. You are to provide for your needs and those of your family- needs not greeds! At the same time you must not turn a deaf ear to the poor (21:13). There are people who have fallen on hard times and we must listen to their cry. ‘He who gives to the poor will not lack’ (28:27); God loves a cheerful giver (2Cor 9:8).

In conclusion, God’s economy is different to the economies of this world, be they capitalist or socialist. Wealth is not the ultimate good. Accumulation of excess wealth, especially when this is by dishonesty, or at the expense of the poor, is condemned and will bring divine judgment (28:20). Wealth without fear of the Lord is dangerous. Let us not forget the word ‘wise’ in saying, ‘Healthy, wealthy and wise’. In the words of Keller, ‘The Christian community should model to the world a society in which wealth and possessions are seen as tools for serving others and not as a means for personal advancement or fulfilment’ -we can add ‘indulgence’.

**The good wife** Proverbs - a wife

In the beginning God made them male and female, and ordained that a man leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife for life (Mat 19:4-5). The family is at the centre of God’s plan for human society. Sin corrupted God’s plan, a corruption which has been seen down through history, but perhaps never more so than today. Young men and women are growing up confused about relationships with the opposite sex- as well as their own sexuality. Gone are the days, so it would seem, when sexual activity was confined to the marriage bed, as ordained by God (Heb 13:4)? Such a society made for straightforward relationships with people of the opposite sex. Men could talk to women without thought of ‘hitting on them’, as they say, and women could talk to men without thought of seducing them.

The contraceptive pill is often blamed for the increase in promiscuity in the 1970’s, but a decline in biblical teaching was a contributing factor. Some fifty years later we are reaping the rewards with men being accused of sexual harassment, women being accused of seducing their boss, and all manner of other perversions paraded in our press. We pray that the teaching of the Bible and the wisdom of Proverbs might be heard by families, and those preparing to establish families, in this tragic scenario that is our society.

The Book of Proverbs started out with a father teaching his son to avoid the immoral woman or seductress (2:16). Society was not perfect in the days of Solomon either but the teaching of the Bible is perfect. The immoral woman seems to have been a woman breaking her marriage vows (2:17). A girl in those days was protected by her father until she was given in marriage- as a virgin! The son was not protected in the same way- hence the lengthy warnings given to him about the immoral woman. But not all women were immoral! From chapter 10 onwards we find proverbs referring to the wise woman and the excellent wife. There are also some referring to the not-so-excellent wife. The closing chapter is an extended discourse on the excellent or virtuous wife.

**1. The wise woman**

‘The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish woman pulls it down with her hands’ (14:1). The wisdom of a wise woman starts with the fear of the Lord. It leads to her honouring her husband. ‘An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who causes shame is like rottenness in his bones’ (12:4). ‘She does her husband good and not evil all the days of her life’ (31:12). It has often been noted, and indeed is a proverb itself, that behind every successful man is an excellent wife. The well-being of the home depends on the well-being of the head of the home, and the wife and mother has a huge role to play in the well-being of that man. Vice versa is also true but our focus at this time is on the woman.

In the NT, wives are told to be submissive to their husband even if they do not obey the word of God (1Peter 3:1). They are to be of a ‘gentle and quiet spirit which is precious in the sight of God’ (1Peter 3:4). A wife’s behaviour towards her husband is not conditional on his behaviour. She respects and obeys him ‘as unto the Lord’. The husband of such a wife acknowledges the great blessing he has received from the Lord. ‘He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favour from the Lord’ (18:22). ‘A prudent wife is from the Lord’ (19:14). She is worth more than houses and riches. The man with such a wife can go about his work without shame or embarrassment; he can take his place among the elders at the city gate (31:11, 23). A gracious or kind-hearted woman gains honour for herself and her family (11:16).

**2. A contentious wife**

We said that behind every successful man is a good wife. On the other hand, many a man has fallen because of a foolish wife. If she has not gone off seducing other men she may have been loose with her tongue, or in some other way brought shame upon her husband and family (22:14). A woman who causes shame is like rottenness in the bones of her husband (12:4). She can make him or break him.

In a vivid metaphor Solomon speaks of a beautiful woman who lacks discretion as ‘a gold ring in a pig’s snout’ (11:22). No explanation is necessary! You may be familiar with other vivid images referring to a contentious woman or a nagging wife. Such a wife is like the constant dripping of a tap (19:13, 27:15). ‘Better to dwell in a corner of a housetop than in a house shared with a contentious woman’ (21:9), 25:24). ‘Better to dwell in the wilderness than with a contentious and angry woman’ (21:19). As much as husbands sometimes deserve to be in the dog-house, as we say, it is not good for them to be driven there by a nagging, angry wife.

A marriage is founded upon love and respect. Love covers a multitude of sins (17:9). Love suffers long and is kind. Love forgives and keeps on forgiving. Love does not allow anger to rule in the heart. Through the word you are hearing, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, you can overcome a contentious or angry nature. Contentions often arise with regard to children- Proverbs gives us wisdom with regard to raising children. Godly parents will read such wisdom and glean truth from the rest of the Bible with regard to raising children. They will also be ready to listen and learn from their elders. Advice from ‘experts’ in child psychology and education must be filtered through the lens of Scripture. If Scripture is the word of God, as we believe, then it is the word of our designer and maker, not just one who has studied human behaviour.

Proverbs has a father and mother together raising their God-given children (6:20, 10:1). It assumed that they ‘speak with one voice’ writes Kidner. Is that a tough ask? It may be so, but it is absolutely essential. Children are clever at applying the principle of divide and rule. Too often the father relegates all training and discipline to the mother. Sometimes the mother leaves it all to the father. They do this because of contentions. They do this because of a failure to read the Bible and pray together for their children. In some families the only prayer is when the minister visits! Parents must pray together and ‘speak with one voice’.

Solomon speaks of husband and wife as companions or friends (2:17). They ‘speak with one voice’ to their children and also to the world. Each remains an individual, but the ‘joining together’ in marriage involves more than just the flesh. We often refer to ‘soul mates’. Some even notice likenesses in behaviour that develop over time in a marriage. Pity the person who comes between husband and wife, or who complains to a husband about his wife (cf.6:34). Some years ago I complained to my ‘boss’ about something his wife did. They were not a particularly close couple- she was rather overbearing and bossy- but, even so, I learned not to come between husband and wife.

**3. An excellent wife**

If husbands spent more time thanking God for their wife rather than criticising them they would enjoy more peace and prosperity. While some proverbs speak of a nagging wife or a wife obsessed with her beauty, most remind us of the blessings a good wife brings to her husband, her family and her community. In the closing chapter of Proverbs we find an ode to an excellent wife. It is an acrostic poem in which each verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The mention of maidservants (31:15) and rich cloth (31:21, 22) points to this being a wealthy or high class woman. But this does not mean it is not applicable to other wives.

Some men have a checklist of what they want in the woman they marry. This poem is a good place to start with such a list. In Western society the checklist often has just one thing- is she beautiful. Or it may be ‘love at first sight’- ‘I love her and that is all that matters’. But beauty can be skin deep, and love can be blind. Sometimes we tell young men to look at the girl’s mother because that is what she will be like in a few years!

An excellent wife is worth much more than rubies- she is a treasure beyond measure, a gift from the Lord (18:22, 31:10). So what makes an excellent wife? This poem speaks about her hard work and business skills, the focus of such work being her household. We will come to her works in a moment. Firstly, we will look at her wisdom. She is a woman whose beauty is an inner beauty, a beauty that is neither deceptive nor fading (31:30). The apostle Peter writes of the ‘unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit’ (1Peter 3:4 NIV). Such beauty is precious in the sight of God, and in the sight of a God-fearing husband.

This excellent wife is a woman who fears the Lord (31:30). The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (1:7. 9:10). A wife who fears the Lord is, of course, one who believes in Jesus Christ. A man who marries an unbeliever cannot expect to have a wife and family like the one pictured in this poem. Too many Christian young men are deceived by outward beauty. This checklist focusses on the heart and the hands, not the face.

Focussing on the hands does not necessarily mean a woman who is big and strong. African men, I was told, focus on the woman’s strength because the wife has to dig the field and plant the crops. The woman in Proverbs may not have been digging her field but she was ‘willing to work with her hands’ in order to feed and clothe her family (31:13). She was a trader, making garments which she traded for food (31:13-15). Many women today are involved in paid employment; they work to provide food and clothes for the family. Of course, with young children such work may not be possible; some work to pay for child care. Some work to the detriment of their children, failing to teach them how to live. This excellent wife, as we will see, taught her children wisdom (31:26). The wife who is busy at home may be able to save as much money as one out working. The bottom line is providing for the family. Bread-savers can be just as valuable as bread-winners!

This virtuous wife is an astute financial manager. She considers a field, buys it, and plants a vineyard- what we call a wise investment. She had maidservants, and maybe employees in her vineyard, whom she treats well (31:15). She has skills in weaving and sewing. Making clothes and mending clothes was a way of saving money, as well as earning money (31:13, 19, 22). It may be different nowadays, but the hard working wife still applies herself to saving money- maybe by making kids lunches or bargain shopping. Is she sends her husband shopping for necessities it may cost twice as much!

This capable and hardworking wife brings security to the family. She is not afraid of snow or hard times because she is confident, and brings confidence to the whole family (31:21). She is always there, always providing, always giving, and always loving. Her work may not be noticed by the world but it is by the Lord, and hopefully by her husband and children.

‘The heart of her husband safely trusts her; so he will have no lack of gain’. ‘She does him good not evil’ (31:11, 12). Pity the family where the wife is always undermining her husband. The excellent wife will encourage her husband in his work. She will praise him to his face, and to the family, and to the world. This ‘blessed’ man will take his place among the elders at the city gate (31:23). He is successful in his work, in his business and in his community. People will know he has an excellent wife by his demeanour and by his words (31:28). Her children also ‘rise up and call her blessed’ (31:28). She is not known as the woman with the horrible kids! Some wives are so busy seeking recognition in the world through outward beauty, their career, their wealth or their charitable work that they neglect family duties and end up with a reputation based on delinquent children and maybe a divorced husband.

It is not wrong to have a career or to do charitable work but not at the expense of family. This wife actually ‘extends her hand to the poor and reaches out to the needy’ (31:20). She has not cut herself off from society. She has not ‘let herself go’ as they say. Through her hard work and careful management she not only provides for her family but also has something for poor neighbours (31:20, Eph 4:28).

Is this wisdom what young women are hearing today? Listen to the shouts of the ‘me too’ marchers and the new feminists. Even the old feminists are ashamed of the new feminists that they see carrying placards like, ‘down with men’, ‘all men are misogynists’, ‘give me free child care’, ‘give me a better job’. When will we see placards saying, ‘I love my husband’, ‘thank God for my kids’? We probably will not see them because wise, God-fearing women are too busy providing for their family and teaching them wisdom from the word of God.

**Anger and arguments** Proverbs- anger and arguments

I read that quite a few people are paying the money to get their DNA tested. Some do so in the hope of discovering that they have royal ancestors. One fellow, who loved surfing, found out that his ancestors were Vikings who loved the sea. So now he has a great excuse to get out of housework and go surfing- ‘it’s in my DNA’ he can say! If a man discovers his ancestors were bank robbers, I suppose he can tell the judge, ‘it’s in my DNA’, and expect to be exonerated!

In this age of individualism and narcissism people do not want to take responsibility for anything they do or say. You would think that individualism would lead to greater personal responsibility, but not so. Individualism is all about ‘my rights’ and nothing about ‘my responsibilities’. The truth is that God holds each of us responsible for what we do and say. ‘For every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment’ (Mat 12:36). ‘For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ’, where we will give account of all that we have done and said (2Cor 5:10, Rom 14:12). There will be no blaming of parents, of teachers, of politicians, of preachers or your DNA in that day. Let us look at what the Bible, and the Book of Proverbs in particular, teaches about anger and bad behaviour.

**1. Anger-why?**

Being made in the image of God we are created with emotions. We have the ability to love, to hate, and to get angry. The Bible speaks of God getting angry and Jesus getting angry. God got angry when his people made a golden calf to worship (Exod 32:10), and he got angry with Balaam (Num 22:22). Jesus got angry with the money changers in the temple. God hates sin. God is a jealous God. Jesus was jealous for the glory of God. God’s anger is righteous or holy anger. Human anger, on the other hand, arises from a heart corrupted by sin. Our anger may arise out of jealous love for our wife (6:34), or for the name of God. But mostly it is out of love for self, and out of pride.

‘Be angry but do not sin’ (Ps 4:4, Eph 4:26). The danger of anger, and it is a dangerous emotion, is that it can lead to sinful words and sinful deeds. ‘A quick tempered man acts foolishly’ (14:17). ‘A fool’s wrath is known at once, but a prudent man covers shame’ (12:16). ‘A fool gives full vent to his feelings, but a wise man holds them back’ (29:11). Commenting on this verse Keller writes, ‘While anger is not a sin in and of itself, it should be a passing thing, directed without excess to solve the problem, resulting in calm in the end’ (cf. Ps 30:5). On the other hand, ‘no other sinful emotion has led to so, much violence and, literally, to so many dead bodies’. ‘An angry man stirs up strife, and a hot-tempered commits many sins’ (29:22 NIV).

I once knew an angry man. When he started reading the Bible and praying he told me how he was able to control his anger, especially on the road. Road rage reveals just how many angry people exist. Domestic violence is another measure of the extent of anger in our society. We have laws against such violence, yet secular humanism actually teaches self-assertion and passion. Players are psyched-up before a match to ‘hate’ and to ‘crush’ the opposition. It is not enough to play the game, you have to get angry with your opponent. Wisdom tells us to control our emotions, especially anger.

In modern society self-control is seen as unhealthy, and a sign of weakness. But self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:23); and this is what enables us to rule over anger. Anger is an emotion that can, and must, be controlled if you are to avoid its destructive consequences. Anger arises in our sinful hearts, but a sinful heart can be changed. When anger arises, deal with it quickly and decisively. ‘Do not let the sun go down upon your anger, and give no place to the devil’ (Eph 4:26, 27). The devil will quickly take control of our anger if we don’t, in the strength of the Lord, do so ourselves. My father would say we had the devil on our back when we had a temper tantrum!

Interestingly, anger often arises when we feel a loss of control over our circumstances. We want to be in control of our life, and everything around us at all times. Balaam got angry with his donkey when it did not do what he wanted, and he beat this dumb animal (Num 22:27). People sometimes get angry with a TV or a machine that does not work. But mostly our angry is directed at fellow human beings who we feel have offended us or caused us harm in some way.

Pride, one of the seven deadly sins, means we are easily offended. Anger is up there next to pride in this list. Prick someone’s pride and they react, they react in anger. ‘A fool vents his feelings but a wise man holds them back’ -as in he exercises self-control (29:11). An angry outburst causes strife and broken relationships (29:22). Words said in anger cannot be taken back. ‘A harsh word stirs up anger’ (15:1). ‘Whether the fool rages or laughs there is no peace’ (29:9). Put two angry people together and there is no end to conflict and strife. Do not stop to meddle in any such conflict (26:17). If you are wise you will avoid an angry person- ‘make no friendship with an angry man’ (22:24). ‘A hot-tempered person must pay the penalty: rescue them and you will have to do it again’ (19:19). Do you know an angry person? Do you try to avoid them? Or are you the angry person that others try to avoid?

**2. Anger-why not?**

Anger without self-control causes harm to one’s self, as well as to others. ‘A stone is heavy and sand is weighty, but a fool’s wrath is heavier than both of them’ (27:3,4). ‘Like a city whose walls are broken through is the person who lacks self-control’ (25:28NIV). We sometimes speak of a person ‘letting down their defences’. An angry person lets down all their defences and brings shame upon their own head. They open themselves up to total ruin. Shame and punishment awaits outbursts of anger.

And it is not just the law of consequences that is operating. Solomon refers to the wrath of the king that is directed against the evil doer. ‘The king’s favour is toward a wise servant, but his wrath is against him who causes shame’ (14:35). The king or the governor, as we know, is sent by the Lord for the punishment of evil doers (1Peter 2:14). He is not to exercise personal wrath but judicial wrath as God’s representative. Sometimes the king fails in this regard. The king may himself be a man of wrath; ‘as messengers of death is the king’s wrath, but a wise man will appease it’ (16:14) and ‘the king’s wrath is like the roaring of a lion’ (19:12, 20:2). In this case we remember the King of kings who will punish every man, including a king, who does evil.

Jesus said, ‘Whoever is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment’ (Mat 5:22). Anger, he said, is tantamount to murder. It is a deadly sin. Murder is committed when an angry heart directs one’s actions. ‘Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts and murders’ (Mat 15:19). When anger is controlled there is no murder. To even wish a person harm is sin; ‘Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles. Lest the Lord sees it and is displeased’ (24:17, 18).

Exercise self-control and refrain from outbursts of anger for your own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. ‘He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city’ (16:32). And remember the judgment of God. As parents you will, I hope, be teaching your children to control their anger. You will be teaching them to be slow to anger (14:29, 15:18, 16:32, 19:11, James 1:19). You might be telling them to stop and take a deep breath when feelings of anger arise in their heart. You might be telling them not to be so easily offended, as in, don’t be so proud. You might be telling them not to jump to conclusions about the motives of the other person.

As Christian parents you can teach them more than this. You can teach them the wisdom we are learning from the Bible. You can teach them that, ‘God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble’ (3:34, James 4:6). You can teach them to look to Jesus, who ‘when he was reviled, did not revile in return’ (1Peter 2:23). You can teach them what Jesus says about loving your enemies and praying for those who are spiteful bullies (Mat 5:44). If we love our enemies who is left to hate- just the donkey or the dog!

**3. Another way**

We do not have to be ruled by anger. There is another way. It is the way of love. Hatred and anger must give way to love, because love covers a multitude of sins (10:12, 19:11, 1Peter 4:8). ‘Love suffers long and is kind, love does not behave rudely, does not seek its own and is not provoked’ (1Cor 13: 4-5). God is love, and those who know God know love. God showed his love towards us in Jesus Christ, in that when we were his enemies, ‘while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8). We are commanded to love one another as we love ourselves- the royal law as James calls it (James 2:8). We cannot say we love God while we hate our brother (1John 3:10 & 4:21). Proverbs does not speak so much about love, but it is there in Proverbs 10:12 as the opposite of hatred, and the means by which we overcome the sin of malice and anger.

Knowing love, and the other fruits of the Spirit like peace, patience, and self-control as already mentioned, we can forgive those who actually offend or hurt us- I say ‘actually’ because more often than not the offense was not intended. May God give us the grace of discernment! But even if the hurt is deliberate, we do not react in anger. We can tell the person how they have hurt us, remembering that a soft answer turns away wrath (15:1) and, ‘a gift in secret pacifies anger’ (21:14). We can forgive that person. Indeed, Jesus says we must forgive one another if we want his forgiveness (Mat 6:15).

We can go further and pour burning coals on their head; ‘If you enemy is hungry give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty give him water to drink; for so you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the Lord will reward you’ (25:21,22). The apostle Paul refers to this wisdom in Romans 12:20. He refers to it in the context of not repaying evil for evil but of living at peace as far as we are able. What does this proverb mean? A response of love will confound your enemy. They will be confused. But more than this, they will cover their head in shame. ‘The coals of fire represent pangs which are far better felt now as shame than later as punishment’ (Kidner). The Egyptians, apparently, had a ritual in which a guilty person carried a basin of glowing coals on his head as a sign of his repentance. So in returning good for evil, you may cause your enemy to repent.

Elisha led the blinded soldiers of the Syrian army into the city of Samaria. When their eyes were opened they saw they were in the hands of their enemy. The king of Israel asked if he should kill these captured men. But Elisha said, ‘no, give them food and water and send them home’. ‘So the bands of Syrian raiders came no more into the land of Israel’ (2Kings 6:21-23). They were ‘killed with kindness’ we might say.

**4. And God!**

‘Vengeance is mine says the Lord, I will repay’. This is how Paul quotes Deuteronomy 32:35 in Romans 12:19. We read the same wisdom in Proverbs 24:29 and 20:22 (NIV): “Do not say, ‘I will pay back’, for this wrong! Wait for the Lord and he will deliver you”. In anger we take matters into own hands and bring shame, or worse, upon our own head. When we pray and give the matter to the Lord, he will deal with it justly. He will calm our heart and deal with the offender as he determines. Unlike our judgment, and any hasty reaction we might undertake in anger, the Lord always judges justly.

Let us be those who are slow to anger. Let us not return evil for evil but good for evil. Let us remember that the Lord says, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay’.

**Animals** Proverbs 12:10

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and all that is therein (Gen 1:1). Every species of plant and every species of animal were created by God in the beginning. This is seen as radical teaching these days but was widely accepted before the godless theory of evolution was devised by Charles Darwin. According to this theory man is descended from the apes. Actually, for thousands of years Hindus have believed that the cow or the monkey might be the reincarnation of their mother or father, and animists have believed the spirits of their ancestors inhabit created things. In this sense evolution is not new when it teaches that man evolved from apes and monkeys. Evolutionists, like Hindus and Animists, come up short when it comes to man’s relationship to the animals- as well as the whole question of salvation!

When we turn away from God’s word as we have it in the Bible such corrupt and confused thinking enters in. ‘They exchanged the truth of God for the lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever, Amen’ (Rom 1:25). The modern secular humanist thinks he is at the forefront of preserving forests and caring for animals, but in truth he stands beside Hindus and other pagans who worship created things. Ignoring the truth of divine creation leads to ignorance and confusion when it comes caring for animals. Evidence of this abounds in the activities of animal rights activists, not to mention many pet owners.

Many Christians are also confused because they do not know what the Bible teaches about the covenant God made with the animals, and between man and the animals. Our children are being brainwashed with pagan teaching and we are not countering this with Biblical teaching. ‘Bible people must provide a balance between adoration and exploitation’ writes one Bible scholar. He goes on, ‘The whole creation and we human beings especially have as a first purpose to chant the glory of the Creator-Redeemer (Ps 19:1)’. We do admit that some ‘Christians’ have exploited God’s creation because they made money their god. They even argued from the Bible, as they did when trying to defend slavery.

I was interested to read that William Wilberforce, renowned for his efforts to stop the slave trade, was in a group that formed the RSPCA in England in 1821. Many in that group were clergymen. In fact, in 1832 it was resolved ‘that the society be entirely based on the Christian faith and Christian principles’. This society is no longer run by Christians; its good work continues despite the inevitable confusion that has come about from abandoning Christian principles.

The Bible says, ‘a righteous man regards the life of his animal, but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel’ (Prov. 12:10). Few stop to read this truth, hidden away as it is in the Book of Proverbs. But we are going to look at it today in the context of the whole Bible, beginning at the creation, then the law, then this wisdom and the prophets, and finally the NT.

**1. Creation**

God made the animals on the sixth day of creation, the same day as he made man. He did not make man from monkeys over millions of years; he made both from the dust of the ground (Gen 2:7,19). He did not make man and the animals equal; only man is made in the image of God and with a soul. He told man, or Adam, to have dominion or rule over the fish, the birds and the cattle (Gen 1:26). Note that it was God who gave man this responsibility. Man did not suddenly discover that he could dominate the animals. God made man his manager or steward of the creation. Managers are answerable to the owner; God remains the owner of His creation (Ps 50:10, 11). When God called the animals to Adam for him to name them Adam was exercising this dominion. God was in fact establishing a covenant between Adam and the animals. He was making Adam responsible to care for and protect the animals: you are responsible to care for the children you name! Adam was given the garden to tend and keep, as well as the animals (Gen 2:15).

When man sinned against God his covenant relationship with God was corrupted, as was his relationship with other human beings, and his relationship with the animals and creation. The creation continues to groan under this corruption caused by mans’ sin (Rom 8:22). When the corruption became unbearable, God intervened to destroy man whom he had created, along with the beasts. ‘But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord’ (Gen 6:7, 8). Noah built a boat in which he saved not only his family but all the different species of birds and animals that existed on the earth. Thankfully, Noah was not like some involved in the live transport of sheep to the Middle East in our day! While in the ark, God remembered Noah and all the animals with him (Gen 8:1). After this world-wide flood God established a new covenant with Noah and the animals (Gen 9:9,10), giving the animals into his hand and allowing him to use them as food.

Animals were an integral part of ancient societies. Still today they provide milk, meat, wool, and sometimes draft power. Oxen are used to plow and thresh grain in many parts of Asia. With modern technology we rely less on animals, for better or for worse; although race-horses and pets often get treated better than poor people and children. Peter Singer, in his godless prognostications, thinks we will soon have meat produced in a petri dish which will avoid any animal suffering. He will then become a meat eater, and the world will be able to do without animals which will go a long way to stopping climate change! When men think they know better than God it is no wonder the creation groans.

**2. The Law**

When God gave the Law to Moses, in preparation for the coming of Christ the Redeemer, he included commands regarding the treatment of animals. The command to keep holy rest on the Sabbath included ‘your cattle’. The command not to covet included ox and donkey (Exod 20). Moses later gave other commands to prevent cruelty to animals, like that in Deuteronomy 25:4: ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain’. If people were cruel to their animals they were breaking God’s law. Balaam was shamed for angrily beating his donkey. Dumb animals often suffer at the hands of wicked men.

Yet wicked people often treat their animals better than they do fellow human beings, especially the poor. The legalistic Pharisees refused to let their sheep suffer on the Sabbath but took no pity on a man suffering on the Sabbath, to the disgust of Jesus (Mat 12:11). Jesus pointed out that people who have souls are more precious to God than animals or birds (Mat 9:31). Even so, God cares for the animals and birds, giving them their food in due season (Ps 145:15, Mat 6:26). Some Hindu men will buy medicine for their cow but not their wife. Some pagans in our society spend heaps to keep their pet alive while ignoring the plight of sick and starving children. This is the corruption and confusion that comes when we ignore the Law of God and of Christ Jesus.

**3. Proverbs and Prophets**

We come to the teaching of the Book of Proverbs and the Prophets with regard to animal welfare, and to verse 10 of Proverbs 12 in particular. Other proverbs refer to the dog (26: 11, 17), seemingly man’s companion animal even in those days; some people eat dogs but we know them as working animals or pets. In the providence of God, dogs make great companions but must never be seen as comparable to humans beings; no animal was found comparable to Adam, which is why God made another human being (Gen 2:20).

Another proverb refers to the ox: ‘Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox’ (14:4). Kidner seems to miss the point when he writes of the danger of being overly organised- the manger being clean. The point is that if the ox is not fed it will not have the strength to work and your productivity will decrease. We saw many hungry horses and oxen in India, not to mention other cruelty to animals. The fact that the animal might be their reincarnated uncle did not seem to matter. ‘Even the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel’ (12:10). Evolutionists are similarly confused and cruel. The ardent evolutionist, Richard Dawkins, would like to see the woolly mammoth to be brought back into existence despite its demise under his laws of evolution: the survival of the fittest. Evolutionists cling to this theory while at the same time striving to keep obviously ‘unfit’ animals alive. Knowing God as the creator we face no confusion when it comes to care for animals and the environment.

‘The righteous man regards the life of his animal’, where the word ‘regard’ comes from the root ‘to know’. The righteous man does not exalt himself as the know-it-all ruler of creation but humbles himself under the all-knowing God of creation. Such a man knows best how to care for the creatures that God has created. On the other hand, the wicked act in rebellion against the goodness of God in creation such that even their tender mercies are cruel- even deadly (12:10, cf. Deut 32:33). With her own children to care for, and starving children in India to help, a young mum I know did not spend hundreds of dollars trying to relieve the suffering of her aged cat; she took him to the vet to be put down.

There are interesting references to animals in the Prophets, especially Joel and Jonah. When the king of Nineveh proclaimed a fast of repentance he included the domestic animals: ‘let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock taste anything’ (Jonah 3:7). And then, when the Lord took pity on the city of thousands who did not know their left hand from their right, he also took pity on ‘much livestock’ (Jonah 4:11). Recall how God remembered the animals in the ark with Noah (Gen 8:1). The prophet Joel speaks of animals groaning, of cattle having no pasture and sheep suffering (Joel 1:18). Why were they suffering? Because of Israel’s sin; because of the sin of man. This prophet even speaks of the beasts of the field crying out to God because God was punishing his people through drought and fire (Joel 1:28).

The teaching of the Bible is consistent; there is no confusion here. God made everything good. He put man in charge of his creation, but man sinned and brought all creation into corruption, suffering and death. When there was no death the animals did not die either. Before sin they did not fight and kill other animals. Isaiah takes us back to such a time even as he pictures the new heaven and new earth in which wolf and lamb lie down together, and lion and ox feed together (Isa 11:6-9, 65:25, cf. Hosea 2:18). Other than this we are not told about animals in heaven. We ourselves will have new bodies, and relationships will be different because flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God (1Cor 15:50).

**4. New Testament**

We have already touched on most NT references to the relationship between man and the animals, a relationship that recognises God as the creator of both, and in a covenant relationship with both man and the animals. Jesus ministered in a rural setting where he used the picture of sheep in various sayings and parables: ‘Behold, I send you out like sheep among wolves’ (Mat 10:16). A sheep gets lost and is rescued by its owners in a parable teaching how God cares for us (Mat 18:10). Sheep, like other domestic animals, depend on man to care for them.

In the providence of God the relationship is mutually beneficial with man doing the caring and the animal providing man with milk, meat, wool and eggs in the case of birds. Jesus does not prohibit the eating of meat; nor does the apostle Paul. Killing for meat is not cruel when done to minimise suffering. ‘Animal abuse is as unchristian as animal worship or obsession with pets’.

The NT focus is on the salvation of human beings made in the image of God. It was man who sinned, bringing corruption and death to the creation. It is man who is redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ, bringing deliverance from suffering for the creation. ‘The whole creation was subjected to futility; it labours with birth pangs until now, waiting for the sons of God to be revealed’ (Rom 8:19-20). It is the righteous, not the wicked, who know how to care for the animals. Let us take seriously our God-given responsibility to be stewards of the creation. This is something we can do as believers. We are responsible to God, not those who worship creatures, or those who selfishly exploit them.

**Dare to discipline** Proverbs - on children

In 1970 Dr James Dobson wrote a book entitled, ‘Dare to discipline’. He wrote in response to modern methods of child rearing espoused earlier in the twentieth century by men like Benjamin Spock, Sigmund Freud and others. They assured us that a child left to itself would outgrow any bad behaviour. They told us that it is society that teaches children to hate and have temper tantrums. The coming of Hitler and Stalin undermined such teaching to an extent, but it continued, and continues to this day.

Dr Dobson disagreed. He is a Christian. He wrote on the basis of his understanding of the Judeo-Christian concept of parenting, but he did not refer specifically to anything written in the Bible. I am not a child psychologist and I am not writing a textbook on raising children. What we are doing is looking at what is written in the Bible, especially the Book of Proverbs, in relation to raising children.

What all these ‘experts’ fail to mention is the matter of sin. Dobson accepts this truth but secular ‘experts’ do not. The theory of evolution rejected the truth of divine creation and of the entrance of sin into the world- ‘through one man sin entered the world… and death spread to all men because all sinned’ (Rom 5:12). We are all born with a sinful nature; this must be recognised in raising children. A child’s instinct is towards self-centredness. ‘The rod and rebuke give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother’ (29:15). It would be interesting to know how Hitler was brought up; a child can go astray even with good parenting of course.

When in Proverbs we read of the ‘rod’, some parents are horrified. Others, sadly, hide behind this word as they physically abuse their children. The rod is literal, as in corporal punishment, but it means much more than this. Verbal rebuke and explanation must accompany use of the rod, and it must be used in love not anger. Discipline is essential; boundaries must be set and adhered to. Failure to discipline your child is a failure to love them. The Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and we must do the same- even though we are not perfect ourselves. In fact, the parallel line in the Proverb (3:12) is, ‘just as a father the son in whom he delights’.

In Psalm 127, in words we love to sing, we are reminded that children are a blessing from the Lord- ‘the wombs fruit is a reward’. It is scary being a parent for the first time. The responsibility of caring for a child, feeding and clothing it, and above all teaching it how to live, is a huge responsibility. New parents cry out for help, and for wisdom. Such wisdom may come from their parents or other elders, but more importantly from the Bible. The story of Hannah reminds us not only that children are the gift of God, but that ultimately they belong to the Lord (1Sam 1). Jesus welcomed little children saying, ‘of such is the kingdom of heaven’ (Mat 19:14). He is not saying children are perfect but simply noting their innocence and humility.

What we find in the Book of Proverbs agrees with what we find in the Law of Moses. The fifth commandment, the first in the second table, is directed at children. It is the first commandment with a promise, as Paul reminds us in Ephesians 6:2: ‘that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth’. Children are commanded to honour or respect their father and mother. Will they do this if not taught? No, according to Proverbs 29:15. Although this command does not mention obedience, Ephesians 6:1 certainly does. You cannot demand love but you can demand obedience and respect. Failure to teach respect not only beings shame on you the parent, but leaves the child under divine condemnation. Is your responsibility bigger than you realised? Yet God does not ask us to do what is impossible. He provides us with the necessary wisdom and strength for the task. So let us look at this heavenly wisdom and prayerfully follow it.

**1. Instruction**

Proverbs is well known for verses that mention the rod, but these should not be quoted without understanding as to the meaning of this word and the whole context of child rearing. We will come to these verses shortly when we look at correction. The context of child rearing is that, ‘Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child’ (22:15) - yes, this proverb also says that, ‘the rod of correction will drive it from him’ but this does not mean physical punishment is the first resort. It is no magic bullet, as Keller says. Earlier on in chapter 22 we read, ‘Train up a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it’ (22:6).

The word ‘train’ means ‘instruct’, instruct by words and actions. A child’s learning begins from the day of birth. Some think even the unborn child responds to music, but we all agree that from birth the child responds to things in this world. It lets you know when it is hungry! The infant does not have language skills but it is observing and learning. Even when language skills develop it still learns by way of example- example from you, the parent. ‘My son give me your heart and let your eyes observe my ways’ (23:26). ‘The righteous man walks in integrity and his children are blessed after him’ (20:7). If non-verbal and verbal instruction do not match up the child will be confused.

In the face of hypocrisy, observation is usually the more powerful teacher. Moreover, trying to change behaviour learnt in infancy is not easy. Bad language from an infant must not be thought funny. Bad behaviour must be corrected immediately- tomorrow is too late. ‘He who spares his rod hates his son but he who loves him disciplines him promptly’ or early (13:24). ‘Character (in which wisdom emboldens itself) is a plant that grows more sturdily from cutting back’ writes Kidner, and this from early days.

Instruction will include instruction in the word of God itself. When a child can read they can be shown that what they are being taught is divine wisdom not just the wisdom of the parents. A young child may not clearly distinguish between God and his dad; both are called father! But his human father will make mistakes and have to say sorry, unlike his heavenly Father. Even so, a ‘wise son heeds his father’s instruction’ (13:1), and ‘he who disdains instruction despises his own soul’ (15:32). ‘He who hates correction will die’ (15:10). A child becomes progressively more independent but never disrespectful of parents.

**2. Correction**

In terms of biology, a human infant is the slowest of all the animals to become independent. We may live longer than most animals, but surely it is that being made in the image of God human beings have much knowledge and wisdom to pass on from generation to generation; wisdom is not coded in our DNA. A child left to itself not only brings shame to its mother but is on the way to destruction and hell (29:15, 19:18, 23:14). ‘He who hates correction will die’ (15:10). ‘Correct your son, and he will give you rest’ (29:17).

Because of folly in the heart, because of original sin, the child will sin. Instruction does not occur on a blank slate, as we say. The child will rebel at times- sin is rebellion. Rebellion can be more than unpleasant; it can be dangerous. A child who disobeys the instruction not to cross the busy road may be killed. Parents will take the hand of the young child to stop it being killed. Physical restraint saves lives. Then rod of correction begins with such physical restraint. The child may try pulling away but the loving parent will not let go even if the child screams, ‘you’re hurting me’.

A step further in terms of correction involves a similar ‘battle of wills’ and the need for a parent to instil wise behaviour. Some form of corporal punishment will be necessary to ‘drive foolishness from the child’ (22:15). Keller writes, ‘If sin and folly are deep in every child’s heart, it will take more than words to root them out’. Such correction must not be done in revenge or anger but with self-control and with love (Eph 6:4). Far from damaging the child’s psyche, or leading to violent behaviour in the child, as the ‘experts’ tell us, ‘children thrive in an atmosphere of genuine love undergirded by reasonable and consistent discipline’ (Dobson).

Wisdom says, ‘do not withhold correction from a child, for if you beat him with a rod he will not die’, but you will ‘deliver his soul from hell’ (23:13, 14). In the end, according to Proverbs, there are three things that determine how a child grows up; the hearts they are born with, what is called nature, the quality of parenting they receive (nurture), and their own choices. Ultimately God controls the heart of a person and we must always be praying for the child. When they are older that is all we can do but when they are young we must be diligent in our God-given task of instructing and correcting the child from the day of their birth.

**3. Blessing or curse**

If you withhold correction from your child, if you refuse to correct with the rod, you are making a rod for your own back. You have seen the parent embarrassed by the behaviour of their child in a shop. I was in a group meeting in which a mother was called every ten minutes by her teenage daughter pleading to go out with her friends. I think the father was saying, ‘yes’, and the mum, ‘no’. The meeting was a disaster. ‘To have a fool for a child brings grief; there is no joy for the father of a fool’ (17:21 NIV).

In some cultures little boys are treated like gods! I once saw a toddler pulling his mother’s hair, making her cry, and she did nothing. Worse still is the child that curses his father or mother, in direct disobedience to the command. But this is what we often see today. Children call their parents insulting names and get away with it. Again, with infants some think it is funny. It is never a laughing matter. Lack of respect can turn into cursing. ‘There is a generation that curses its father and does not bless its mother (30:11). Do Agur’s words refer to our generation? He goes on, ‘the eye that mocks a father and scorns obedience to a mother will be pecked out by the raven of the valley’ (30:17 NIV). ‘Whoever curses his father or mother, his lamp will be put out in deep darkness’ (20:20). We not only feel sorry for the parent being cursed, but cringe at the judgment coming upon the child.

Children can mistreat their parents in other ways. One proverb speaks of, ‘he who mistreats his father and chases his mother away’ (19:26). Another speaks of one who, ‘robs his father and mother’ (28:24). Unbelievable, you say? Well, listen to the recent news; read about ‘elder abuse’, of children helping themselves to their bank accounts and of turning elderly parents out of the family home so they can sell it. Children have become a curse rather than a blessing to these elderly parents. This is the outcome of ‘modern’ parenting, of teaching children according the ‘experts’ rather than according to the wisdom of the Bible.

Children can be a blessing, of course. ‘A wise son makes his father glad, but a foolish man despises his mother’ (10:1, 15:20). ‘Correct your son… and he will give delight to your soul’ (29:17). The blessing extends from generation to generation. ‘Grandchildren are the crown of the aged, and the glory of children is their fathers’ (17:6). To live to see one’s grandchildren was considered a great blessing. Jacob said to Joseph, ‘I never expected to see your face; and behold God has let me see your offspring also’ (Gen 48:11).

Parents who train up their children with wise instruction and consistent discipline are a blessing to their children (20:7), as their children will one day acknowledge; and the children will be a blessing to them. This is a family living as the Lord intended, a family bringing glory to God. A family in which children fail to honour and obey their parents brings shame to all concerned, and undermines any attempt at Christian witness.

That said, we acknowledge that ‘even the best training cannot instil wisdom’. As Kidner says, ‘A good home may produce a profligate’ (cf.29:3).The prodigal son in the parable Jesus told had a loving father. Despite the love and wisdom exercised in raising a child they sometimes goes astray. But let the parable of the prodigal son give hope in the return of a prodigal child. Yet the teaching of Proverbs 22:6 remains, ‘Train up a child in the way that he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it’.

**A glutton and a drunkard** Proverbs - on drink and food

‘No one is going to tell me what to do with my body. I can, and I will, do what I like with my body’. This is what the ungodly think and often say. They say the same about their money but some, especially the young, do not have much money; all they have is their body. They will treat or mistreat their body as they see fit, and without godly wisdom.

Is it true that we can do what we like with our bodies? Certainly not for believers because, ‘you are not your own, for you were bought at a price, therefore honour God in your body’ (1Cor 6:19, 20). Paul was speaking in the context of sexual relations, but we can extend this truth to the matter of food, drink and drugs. Every person is made in the image of God. God gave us our body and gave us rules as to how we must care for and use our body. Godly wisdom will guide us between the extremes of narcissism and neglect or abuse of our bodies.

You may quote other words of the apostle Paul to justify eating or drinking what you like; for example, ‘the kingdom of heaven is not about eating and drinking’ (Rom 14:17). In this case Paul was speaking in the context of not judging one another in terms of eating or not eating meat, of clean and unclean foods. We never teach that what we eat has any bearing on our salvation (cf.1Tim 4:3). We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Yet, as saved people we are under the control of the Spirit not the flesh. As saved people we are to honour God with our bodies.

Under the Old Covenant there were laws about food; some foods were clean and some unclean. These were religious laws; we must look at these through the lens of the NT, including the words of Apostle Paul in Romans 14. There were also laws and wisdom about the glutton and the drunkard. If a son was stubborn and rebellious, disobedient, and a glutton and a drunkard, he was to be stoned (Deut 21:20). Here in the Book of Proverbs we find wisdom regarding ‘the drunkard and the glutton’ (23:20). Drunkenness is listed among the sins that men and women put away when they become Christians (1Cor 6:10). It is one of the lusts of the flesh that are contrary to walking the Spirit (Gal 5:21). As we study the wisdom of Proverbs on these matters we will look at drink, then drugs and then food.

**1. Drink**

In the Bible we mostly read of wine, but in Proverbs 20:1 the parallel term is ‘strong drink’; the reference is to any alcoholic drink, any drink that can lead to intoxication or drunkenness. We cannot argue that wine in the Bible, OT or NT, was non-alcoholic. Years ago I visited a tribe in the mountains of NE India. While being welcomed into a village home I was asked if I wanted a drink- I think the same thing happens in Scotland! I was asked to stand up because the drink was in the barrel I was sitting on. It was apple juice that was fermented as there was no refrigeration in the village. The women of that community had banded together to stop young people drinking and taking drugs. Most had become Christians some seventy years previously but had not been taught the wisdom of Proverbs, so it seems.

As a young man I heard the words of Proverbs 20:1: ‘Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise’. This verse, like Proverbs 23:21, refers to drunkenness, to ‘strong drink’ leading a person astray, leading them into rude and aggressive behaviour. Intoxication humiliates and ruins. It leads to, or is defined as, a loss of self-control. It is described as being ‘under the influence’. It is this loss of self-control that leads to sin, to words and actions that hurt others as well as one’s self, contrary to the commands of God. Excessive alcohol is known to destroy the liver, leading to premature death. A caller on talk-back radio was disgusted that a man in our parliament who had had a liver transplant had returned to his old drinking habit.

Alcohol not only destroys livers, it destroys lives, and not only that of the drunkard himself. ‘The drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe a man with rags’ (23:21). ‘He who loves wine and oil will not become rich’ (21:17). The drunkard is unable to work effectively. His life spirals downwards because wine costs money. The drunkard will be tempted to steal, although in our society they can use welfare payments to buy alcohol. In the meantime their family goes without, without food, without clothes, and without loving parental discipline.

Proverbs 23:29-35 is a poem that should be displayed on the door of every pub and club in our city. The list of six woes in verse 29 speaks of woe, sorrow, contentions, complaints, wounds and redness of eyes; not one good thing! What is the benefit of drink? ‘Give strong drink to him who is perishing’ says King Lemuel, in words his mother taught him (31:6). Did your mother teach you such wisdom? Are you paying heed to such wisdom? Strong drink may help you forget your poverty and misery (31:6, 7) but only until you awake. Besides, the forgetting comes along with a bite like that of a snake, and sting like that of a viper (23:32). You will see strange things, you will speak perverse things, you will feel like a man clinging to the mast of a ship tossed about in a storm (23:34).

Solomon goes on to describe the drunken state: ‘they beat me but I did not feel it’ (23:35). This is the state of inebriation. The drunkard eventually awakes, looking for another drink. What a pitiful condition! Where is the wisdom, even worldly wisdom, in getting drunk? It is utterly foolish. There may be some pleasure in looking at a sparkling red and swirling it in the glass (23:31), but remember its bite and the depraved life of the drunkard. Do not be one who lingers long at wine, one who is always looking for the next drink (23:30).

Alcohol is the second largest preventable cause of death in Australia- second only to smoking. Some 20% of the population consumes alcohol at risky levels. Some 40% of 14-19yr olds risk self-harm through regular or binge drinking. Alcohol, or abuse of alcohol, kills fifteen people every day. Thankfully we now have strict drink-driving laws. But still alcohol related crime costs the nation $1.7billion each year. Our society has taken huge steps to deter people from smoking but has failed to do the same with alcohol. Prohibition is not the answer; education will help, but above all we must teach our young people the wisdom of the Bible. We must proclaim hope to people who are without God and without hope in this world. We proclaim hope to those turning to drink to ‘drown their sorrows’ as they say.

Alcohol is not the way to deal with stress, with sorrow, or with any disappointment in life. Jesus says, ‘come to me you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest’ (Mat 11:28). Paul says, ‘do not get drunk with wine … but be filled with the Spirit’ (Eph 5:18). Some people say they only drink socially; Proverbs says, ‘do not mix with winebibbers’ (23:20). It is possible to be social without drinking. It is interesting that those who hated Jesus accused him of being ‘a glutton and winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners’ (Mat 11:19).

Binge drinking among the young is all about peer pressure and social acceptance. Let the young feel accepted at home and in the church family, and above all accepted by Jesus. Until we had a drink-driving law it was common to have a drink with mates at the pub after work. Some have turned to a ‘pick-me-up’ drink at home after work but, as we have said, this is not the way to deal with stress. Listen to the words of King Lemuel; ‘It is not for kings to drink wine, nor princes intoxicating drink, lest they drink and forget the law and pervert the justice of all the afflicted’ (31:4-5). Justice in the home can also be perverted by strong drink.

Wine is not evil in itself. In the OT it is seen as God’s blessing on the land. In this context ‘wine makes glad the heart of man’ (Ps 104:15); this is not a reference to drunkenness. Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast, as many remind us. It is also true that Paul told Timothy to ‘use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and your frequent infirmities’ (1Tim 5:23). Wine has medicinal qualities when taken in moderation- note Paul says ‘a little wine’. Proverbs speaks of strong drink and drunkenness, and about the dangers to one’s health and the health of one’s family and community, of drinking more than ‘a little wine’ for one’s health.

**2. Drugs**

Proverbs does not specifically mention drugs but the principles that apply to alcohol apply to drugs also; drugs are even more addictive and dangerous to health than alcohol. We have already referred to nicotine, the drug found in tobacco- although it is other elements in smoking that actually damage the lungs. Drugs, like alcohol, affect the brain, leading to loss of self-control and to sin. Again, the drug itself may have medicinal benefits. It is the so-called ‘recreational’ use that harms; ‘recreational’ is a euphemism for addiction, just as gambling is euphemistically referred to as a ‘sport’. If drink ‘bites like a snake’ (23:32) then drugs are even worse.

Self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit. It contrasts to works of the flesh as seen in drunkenness, adultery, envy/jealousy and outbursts of wrath (Gal 5:21). Such things have no place in the life of a child of God. We must be in control of our senses whenever we are awake. Just as we are told to flee sexual immorality, we must also flee drugs that destroy the body. Addiction to drugs amounts to sin against one’s body within the context of, ‘you are not your own but were bought with a price’ (1Cor 6:19, 20).

**3. Gluttony**

The word ‘glutton’ is not heard much these days and it is not that common in the Bible, apart from the Book of Proverbs. But we have seen it associated with drunkenness (23:20-21, Deut 21:20). We can be tempted to eat sweet, rich foods like honey to excess, as in making ourselves vomit (25:16). One reason gluttony is seldom mentioned in the Bible is because it is a rich man’s sin. It implies self- indulgence at the expense of the poor (Luke 16:19).

It is surprising that gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins drawn up in the 4th century, maybe on the basis of the Book of Proverbs. Thomas Aquinas listed five ways to commit gluttony, including constant eating of delicacies and excessively costly foods. We may not go to this extent, but such things do occur in our modern society. Our society is rich compared to many, and it is one of gluttony, as measured by the rate of obesity. Obesity has increased from 10% in 1980 to 25% in 2012 and now 28% of the population.

Gluttony is also related to a lack of self-control. Keller refers to ‘the inability to live a life of delayed gratification’- an apt description of modern eating habits and much more. Instant gratification is the rule of the day. Would the apostle Paul describe us as people ‘whose god is their belly’ (Phil 3:19)? Esau, who sold his birthright for a morsel of food (Heb 12:16), was not the last man to put his belly before God. Have we a generation whose mind is set on earthly things, one of these things being food? Have we a generation for whom the kingdom is in fact about eating and drinking- the kingdom of this world (Rom 14:17)?

Remember the wise man Agur who prayed for his allotted food, no more and no less. If he became full he feared he would deny the Lord (30:9). The rich fool of Luke 12 thought only of bigger barns and of eating and drinking. Such foolishness led to an early death; God took his life. For others, obesity will lead to an early death. Gluttony can result in eating oneself to death -remember Nabal the fool (1Sam 25).

The other sin associated with gluttony can be seen in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the sin of failing to attend to the poor man’s hunger. All this rich man thought about was himself- he fared sumptuously every day (Luke 16:19). He did this while Lazarus sat hungry at his gate. For this the rich man was condemned. Practicing self- control when it comes to food not only advances our own health and well-being; it also means we can give something to the poor, and ultimately is pleasing to God.

**Fear of the Lord** Proverbs- fear of the Lord

The Book of Proverbs is all about wisdom. In the opening chapters we saw a father instructing his son in matters of life, namely to stay away from foolish men and seductive women. It is wisdom for the life of any and every human being but it is not wisdom from man- it is wisdom from God. It is, in fact, given within the context of a covenant relationship with the Lord. It is given within the context of a relationship marked by ‘the fear of the Lord’. ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’ (1:7, 9:10). This basic truth is repeated at various intervals throughout the book (e.g. 15:33, 19:23).

What does ‘the fear of the Lord’ mean? It does not mean dread of a capricious, vindictive God, as is the case with other religions. Fear of the Lord is not like fear of a cruel master; it is like fear of a loving father. We stand in awe of Almighty God, yet find comfort in his grace. Fear of the Lord means we do not fear man and the things of this world because the Lord is sovereign and rules over all. Fear of the Lord means we see our life and death as being in His hands; it means seeing everything from his perspective.

At first sight God does not seem to get much of a mention in this book. Wisdom is given with a sense of natural consequences, in apparent contrast to the law. But as we look closer we find many references to the Lord, to Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel. Over one hundred verses refer to the Lord. We will look at some of these today in an attempt to understand better what it means to ‘fear the Lord’ and why wisdom is essential to life. To put it plainly, ‘Hell and destruction are before the Lord, so how much more the hearts of the sons of men’ (15:11). Although we have looked at chapters 1-9 previously we will include some verses from these chapters in this study. We will look at the following points: foundation of the earth, fountain of life, fortress, favour of the Lord, and final word belongs to the Lord.

**1. Foundation of the earth**

‘The Lord by wisdom founded the earth’ (3:19). We revisit this verse, and verses in chapter 8:22-31, to remind ourselves, and every human being, that God created the heavens and the earth- he did so out of nothing in the beginning. Those who refuse to accept this truth falter on the first step towards wisdom. They stumble with every word they speak and everything they do. ‘Foolishness gets life backwards’ (1:29). The fool’s heart ‘rages against the Lord’ (19:3). His effort at good works are an abomination to the Lord, as are his sacrifices (15:8, 21:27) and his prayer (28:9). Without faith it impossible to please God (Heb 11:6).

The Lord is the maker of the poor (14:31, 17:5) and indeed of us all. As such the Lord knows how we ‘tick’, just as the maker of your car knows how it works. Only a fool ignores the maker’s instructions. I was such a fool when I was young and thought it would be okay to top up the brake fluid with diesel: I ended up with no brakes. Many think they know better than our maker when it comes to marriage and family. The tragic effects of divorce keep pouring in- just last week another study showed two-thirds of teenage referrals for mental health issues were from broken homes. Yet attempts to strengthen marriages are ridiculed. ‘To be wise and oppose God is a contradiction in terms’.

Proverbs gives us wisdom for every aspect of life because every aspect of life is under the oversight of our sovereign God. Men and women think they can run their own life, but while the ‘plans of the heart belong to man, the answer is from the Lord’ (16:1); this is often summarised as ‘man proposes but God disposes’. ‘A man plans his way but the Lord directs his steps’ (16:9). ‘Acknowledge the Lord in all your ways and he will direct your paths’ (3:6).

God does not leave us to do our own thing. He directs us towards what he knows is for our good and his glory. The wise person will not go making plans contrary to the express will of God, or without the counsel of the Lord. Hosea condemned Israel for seeking counsel from idols instead of from the Lord (Hos 4:12). James warns against making detailed plans about the future when we do not even know what will happen tomorrow: “Instead you ought to say, ‘if the Lord wills we shall live and do this or that’” (James 4:15).

**2. Fountain of life**

‘The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life’ (14:27). In another proverb we read, ‘the law of the wise is the fountain of life’ (13:14). If you think the fear of the Lord and the law of the Lord make for a dull, unhappy life, think again! Solomon in his God-given wisdom tells us that God and his words are the fountain of life. The Psalmist agrees when he writes that the testimony of the Lord not only makes the simple wise but rejoices the heart, and in keeping them there is great reward (Ps 19:7-11).

The Samaritan woman in John 4 was busy drawing water from a well when Jesus came and offered her living water. She had little joy in a life of drudgery and duties. Jesus offered her, and he offers you, a fountain of living water, springing up to eternal life (John 4:14). Her life changed, and your life will change, when you accept the Lord Jesus Christ. For the wisdom writer, the fear of the Lord is what brings a fountain of life, or a fulfilled and rewarding life (22:4). If your life is filled with the joy of the Lord you will not be looking for fun and fulfilment in other places, as in the things of this world, the lusts of the flesh or the suggestions of the devil.

The best way to keep a plant from succumbing to the attack of pests or diseases is to keep it strong and healthy. Fear of the Lord keeps us strong and healthy, and able to resist the devil’s attacks. If you are reading your Bible you will not be reading or viewing the filth and futility dished up by the world. If you are in God’s house rejoicing in him you will not be in the house of evil. If the fountain of life is bubbling over in your life you will be a blessing to all your family and friends.

**3. Fortress**

‘He who fears the Lord has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge’ (14:26 NIV). ‘The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe’ (18:10). ‘The fear of man brings a snare but whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe’ (29:25). If you are not walking in the fear of the Lord you will be walking in the fear of man. If the Lord is your helper you will not fear what man might do to you (Ps 118:6).

Where does the child run when they get scared? They run to their dad or mum where they feel safe. Where do dad and mum run where they feel threatened or overwhelmed by the cares of this world? ‘The name of the Lord is a strong tower’. ‘The fear of the Lord is a secure fortress’. We love to sing Psalm 46: ‘God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble, therefore we will not fear’. But do we live out the words that we sing? The fear spoken of in this Psalm is from upheaval in the natural world and in society. The apostle Paul knew what it was to be hated by this world and threatened with violence. That is why he tells us to put on the whole armour of God that we may stand against Satan’s attacks (Eph 6:11).

**4. Favour of the Lord**

‘The fear of the Lord leads to life, and he who has it will abide in satisfaction’ (19:23). We sometimes say, ‘don’t bite the hand that feeds you’. When you walk in the fear of the Lord, the Lord is pleased and he will bless you. If you ignore the Lord and walk in your own ways, or worse still, start worshipping other gods, you cannot expect the Lord to be pleased or to bless you.

Moses warned the people not to forget the Lord when he brought them into the land of plenty (Deut 6:12). But this is exactly what they did; they started worshipping other gods as if they were the source of this plenty- and the Lord got angry with them. Is this not what we see in our society? A generation has grown up in a land of plenty but they do not know the fear of the Lord, and the Lord is not pleased. ‘He who trusts in the Lord will be prospered’ (28:25). ‘When a man’s ways please the Lord he makes even his enemies be at peace with him’ (16:7). Jesus speaks about peace, about loving your neighbour, but who is listening? Just look at the criticism in the media of a man who dares to preach about the love of Jesus.

‘A backslider will be filled with his own ways, but a good man will be satisfied from above’ (14:14). Those who try to bless themselves miss out on the blessing of the Lord. Let us remember that ‘every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down for the father of lights’ (James 1:17). The favour of the Lord means life. ‘The fear of the Lord prolongs days, but the years of the wicked will be shortened’ (10:27).

Jesus said, ‘I have come that they may have life and that they may have it more abundantly’ (John 10:10). Abundant life is a fulfilled, contented and satisfying life; it is not the same as an abundance of possessions. Such a life comes from walking in the fear of the Lord. The Lord works all things together for good, not for everyone but for those who love God and are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28). It is not a case of a fatalistic, ‘she’ll be right mate’, but of the Lord working everything for your good if you love him and walk in the fear of the Lord.

‘There is a difference between slavish, self-interested fear, and the true fear of the Lord’ writes Keller. It is the difference between the mere moralist and the true Christian. Calvin writes, ‘even if there were no hell [we] would shudder at offending the Lord if we truly loved and revered God as Father’. Today many do not even believe in heaven or hell so they make no attempt to live a moral life; they have become true pagans for whom sin in being caught and shamed. Calvin goes on, ‘here is pure and true religion: faith so joined with an earnest fear of God that this fear embraces a willing reverence, and carries with it legitimate worship as is prescribed in the law’. Faith and fear go together when by grace we enter into a covenant relationship with the Lord.

**5. Final word**

Because God is sovereign, because he made us and rules over us, he has the final word. There is no appealing to a higher authority. Moreover, God sees everything we say, and do, and think. ‘The eyes of the Lord are in very place keeping watching on the evil and the good’ (15:3, 5:21). He is watching, and to Him we must all give account (Heb 4:13). ‘The Lord tests the hearts’ (17:3) because he see and knows the intents of the heart (12:2, Gen 6:5). With satellites and drones in the sky, and CCTV cameras all over the place, it is hard to hide from police these days; but it has always been impossible to hide from the all-seeing eyes of God.

When God sees, he acts; he does not stand by helpless when he sees people breaking his commands. We rightly complain when we see people breaking the law with impunity. Wisdom tells us that the Lord will punish law-breakers. He may let them fall into the trap they set for others, or he may act directly by way of judgment; ‘the Lord has made all for himself, yes even the wicked for the day of doom’ (16:4). ‘No proud heart will go unpunished’ (16:5). We must no gloat at the destruction of the wicked (24:17) but we take solemn notice.

We have already mentioned wisdom that says we can make all the plans we like, but in the end it is God who determines the outcome (19:21, 16:1). ‘The horse is prepared for the day of battle but deliverance is of the Lord’ (21:31). Solomon reminds us the, ‘the lot is cast into the lap but its every decision is from the Lord’ (16:33). In his day the high priest carried the Urim and Thummim; and the apostles cast lots to fill the vacancy left by Judas (Acts 1:26). We do not use such means today, but we do seek the Lord’s will, knowing that His will will be done. The wise person walking in the fear of the Lord, commits their way to the Lord, knowing that His ways are perfect and in following them is great reward (16:3, 21:30, 31, Rom 12:2, James 4:15).

**Life and death** Proverbs- life and death

Whenever we attend a funeral we are faced with the reality of death. Gazing upon the lifeless body of a loved one is sobering for our soul. Only a fool ignores the stark reality that one day it will be them lying their lifeless. ‘Better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting. For that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart’ (Eccl 7:2). Not that we should become morbid hypochondriacs.

The reality of death makes the wise person consider their life. It makes us ask what life is, who gave us life, and how we should live our life. The psalmist prays, ‘Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom (Ps 90:12). In the same Psalm we read, ‘The days of our lives are seventy years, and if by reason of strength they are eighty’ (Ps 90:10). Some consider every year above seventy or eighty as a bonus! But even the young should consider every year, and indeed every day, as a gift from God. The focus of the wise person is not in length of days but in what we do in these days.

The Book of Proverbs speaks about life both quantitatively and qualitatively, about number of days and about what we do in these days. Such wisdom is sorely needed today. Too many people are judging their life as not worth living. If I was now speaking on TV you would see a phone number flash across the screen telling you where to get help if you were making such a judgment. Such human services are helpful, but are not to be compared to the blessings promised by the wisdom of God, by Jesus Christ our Lord.

Some who think their life not worth living may be old or terminally ill but this is no reason to lose hope. With their last breath some believers have prayed to the Lord, not necessarily about themselves but about some lost soul they know. They do not ask for euthanasia because they want to live, even if only to pray. Only to pray? What greater work can we do even as we live an active and healthy life; praying is more important than playing!

In Proverbs the wise or the righteous live many days, but the days of the foolish or wicked will be cut short. You may think this is very simplistic, but let us look at what is written before making such judgment. We have limited knowledge of God and his ways, and of other people. Wisdom tells us that God is sovereign, and that he is powerful to judge. We know the wicked will be judged at the resurrection, but do not rule out God’s power to cut short the life of a wicked man or woman. Did wicked Haman see many days? Did Judas see many days? Did Hitler live into old age? You might think of some wicked people in our day. Of course, the life of believers, like the apostle James and Stephen, can also be cut short but this similarly occurs within the sovereign purposes of God. We will first look at what Proverbs teaches about life and then what it teaches about death, although both are included in the antithetical parallelism of a number of proverbs.

**1. Life**

‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’ (9:10). Wisdom is taught in the context of a covenant relationship with the Lord. It is taught within the context of covenant commands or laws. God gave the law that his people might enjoy work and worship while living in the Promised Land. Within the Ten Commandments is one which promises long life in ‘the land which the Lord your God is giving you’- namely the command to honour your father and your mother (Exod 20:12, Eph 6:3). The promise is not of a trouble-free life, yet a life blessed by God is understood. God is powerful to deliver the righteous from any trouble.

A number of proverbs make a promise similar to that of the command. Wisdom says, ‘Receive my sayings, and the years of your life will be many (4:10 cf. 3:2, 9:11). The way of wisdom is always about accepting instruction so, ‘he who keeps instruction is in the way of life’ (10:17, 6:23). ‘The fear of the Lord prolongs days, but the years of the wicked will be shortened’ (10:27). ‘Whoever find me [wisdom] finds life, and finds favour from the Lord’ (8:35).

A life of many days should be of days worth living, and this is exactly what wisdom promises. Life does not simply mean one is breathing or merely existing. Here in the book of wisdom we find life described in vivid metaphors such as, a ‘well of life’, a ‘fountain of life’ and a ‘tree of life’. ‘The law of the wise is a fountain of life’ (13:14). ‘The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life’ (14:27). Then in Proverbs 16:22: ‘Understanding is a wellspring of life’. The law of the Lord is perfect; it enlightens and brings joy to the heart. It is sweeter than honey (Ps 19:11).

Walking in the fear of the Lord, walking in obedience to God’s holy law, and according to heavenly wisdom, is like walking beside a mountain stream. If you have ever been hiking in the hills you will know the delights of drinking cool, fresh water from a stream that is clear as crystal. I remember drinking such refreshing water from a creek after working in the hot sun all morning. This is the picture we are given of the life of the righteous person: peace, joy, honour, satisfaction, and contentment (19:23, 21:21). In Psalm 16 we sing: ‘You have made known to me the path of life divine. Bliss shall I know at your right hand; joy from your face will shine’.

Jesus spoke to the woman at the well about living water. She thought he was talking about fresh, spring water that she would not have to draw out of the well. But Jesus was referring to the water of life that he could give: ‘The water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up to everlasting life’ (John 4:14). Jesus is the wisdom of God. He is the fountain of life. The righteousness of Christ makes our mouth a ‘wellspring of life’ (10:11), a blessing to everyone around us.

Psalm 1 introduces the books of wisdom: Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. In this Psalm we sing that the wise person ‘shall be like a tree planted by a stream, that brings forth fruit in its season, whose leaf shall not wither and whatever he does shall prosper’ (Ps 1:3). This ‘tree of life’ picture of life is also found in Proverbs. ‘The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise’ (11:30). Wisdom is contagious. A righteous life attracts admiration. People say, ‘There is something different about that person and the way they live’. Jesus told his disciples he would make them fishers of men. Are those who know you lured to what they see in your life?

When we see a tree loaded with fruit we rejoice. We feel blessed. We gather at the tree to enjoy its delights. So it is that the wise man or the righteous woman brings delight to their family and their community. ‘Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit’ (18:21). ‘A wholesome/healing tongue is a tree of life’ (15:4). ‘The OT affirms that what was lost with Paradise…can be enjoyed in some measure here and now when man walks with God’.

‘A good tree cannot bear bad fruit’ said Jesus (Mat 7:18). The tree of life does not produce bitter fruit. In the context of controlling our tongue, James indicates that a fresh spring cannot produce bitter water (James 3:11). Fruit is sometimes spoken of as wages: ‘The labour of the righteous leads to life, the wages of the wicked to sin’ (10:16, Rom 6:23).

‘A sound heart’, as in one that does not envy, ‘is life to the body, but envy is rottenness to the bones’ (14:30). A sin like envy or covetousness brings rottenness to the bones. ‘He who hates covetousness will prolong his days’ (28:16). In Proverbs 15:27 to ‘live’ seems to mean to enjoy harmonious family life, for its opposite is not he shall die but he that troubles his own house (Kidner).

Life is often pictured as a path. Each day is a step along this path. Solomon pictures two paths, the same as Jesus. There is a path of life and a path of death. Jesus spoke of the narrow way and the broad way (Mat 7:13-14). Here in Proverbs we read, ‘In the way of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death’ (12:28). Just as Jesus spoke about finding the narrow way, so Proverbs speaks of wisdom or righteousness leading us to the path of life. ‘The way of life winds upwards for the wise, that he may turn away from hell/Sheol below’ (15:24).

Picturing life as a path raises the question of what is at the end of the path. Does Proverbs address this question? Is there any indication of an afterlife? When Jesus spoke about the narrow way that leads to life he was referring to everlasting life- to heaven. Why? Because the broad road leads to destruction or to hell (Mat 7:13-14); not that he was simply concerned about the end of the path. Jesus was concerned about how we live here and now in this world just as much as Proverbs.

Kidner suggests that ‘way of’ can mean ‘way to’ in Hebrew. Certainly in Psalm 16:11 the path of life conveys the idea of everlasting life because it refers to being in the presence of the Lord. Proverbs 12:28 says that there is no death in the pathway of righteousness- although the Hebrew original is difficult to translate. Proverbs 11:7 refers to the wicked man, or his expectations at least, perishing when he dies, and in 14:32, ‘the righteous has a refuge in his death’ can only mean he dies yet still has a place of safety or refuge. So while the focus of wisdom here in Proverbs is on life in this world, the truth of life everlasting that we see so clearly in the teaching of Jesus, is not entirely absent in Proverbs.

**2. Death**

Many proverbs that mention ‘life’ also mention ‘death’ because of the feature called antithetical parallelism. We have considered many of these proverbs already, but we will briefly remind ourselves of the pathway that leads down to hell or Sheol (15:24). It is a pathway that seems right to many people, but its end is the way of death (14:12); this proverb is repeated in 16:25 just in case we missed it the first time! The end of a life of sin is death- the opposite of everlasting life (Rom 6:21).

As we look around we see people who think they have found the secret of life, be it communing with nature, saving the planet, saving the whales, or even helping the poor. For most of course, it is about getting rich, and enjoying the treasures and pleasures of this world. Tragically, those not walking in the fear of the Lord are on the pathway to hell. Those who refuse to listen to wisdom and the instructions we have in the Bible are on the ‘death train’ (10:21, 11:19). ‘He who despises the word will be destroyed but he who fears the commandment will be rewarded’ (13:13). ‘He who keeps the commandment keeps his soul but he who is careless in his ways will die’ (19:16). ‘He who hates correction will die’; ‘he shall die for lack of instruction (15:10, 5:23).

Many people are alive in that they are breathing but they are really dead- they are spiritually dead. They might be called ‘the walking dead’. They exist but they are not living. We are all born dead, dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1). It is only in Christ, who is the wisdom of God that we are made alive. Are you alive in Christ? Are you on the pathway leading upwards to life in Jesus Christ our Lord?

**Neighbour and friend** Proverbs - neighbour and friend

Some time ago a church-goer expressed concern that a family friend was being overly friendly. He wanted the two families to go camping together and for the children to have lots of sleep-overs. I pointed him to wisdom found here in the Book of Proverbs: ‘Seldom set foot in your neighbour’s house lest he become weary of you and hate you’ (25:17). He appreciated this wisdom, but his wife chose the path of confrontation. Next thing I heard was that the two families were not speaking to one another.

At the Fall our relationship with God our maker was corrupted. Interpersonal relationships were also corrupted. We read of Adam blaming Eve for their suffering, and of one of their sons killing his brother out of jealousy. This corruption of marriage and family relationships spread to other relationships; it was not long before Lamech was threatening vengeance upon any who offended or hurt him (Gen 4:23). And so it was that human beings made in the image of God began to fight and make war. James refers to wars and fights, saying they come from pride, from lust and evil desires in the heart (James 4:1, 2). Those without God think that man is evolving and becoming more civilised, but modern history, including two world wars, is contrary. Indeed, a glance at today’s news tells us that corruption of personal relationships continues unabated.

Wisdom found in the Bible is widely ignored but it is wisdom most necessary for us today. We find heavenly wisdom here in the Book of Proverbs, and most profoundly and fully in the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the wisdom of God. The truth of the gospel and the wisdom of God are essential if we are to see an end to fights and wars. ‘Wisdom from above is peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy (James 3:17). It comes as no surprise therefore, to find that many proverbs relate to neighbours and friends. I discovered a list of thirty such proverbs in my notes from seminary. From my own reading there are more; some overlap with other themes we have looked at.

We cannot live without neighbours or friends. We have people living next to us, unless we live on an island. We have neighbours at school and at work. Apart from family, we have friends with whom we share the joys and sorrows of life. ‘There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother’ (18:24). David had such a friend in Jonathan- ‘he loved him as his own soul’ (1Sam 20:17). Jesus counts us as his friend if we do what he commands (John 15:14). Indeed, ‘greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends’ (John 15:13). ‘Neighbour’ and ‘friend’ are translations of the same Hebrew word. ‘Companion’ is another translation. It is best to keep the word ‘brother’ for family, either biological or spiritual. All friends are in a sense neighbours but not all neighbours are friends. We will look firstly at neighbours and then at friends.

**1. Neighbours**

We do not get to choose our family and this is also true to a large extent with our neighbours; although it is wise to check out the neighbours when moving to a new house. We do not get to choose our work mates, but again it is wise to make enquiries about the workplace before taking a job, or about the school before enrolling. The choice that we do have is what sort of neighbour we will be!

We begin with the Ten Commandments where we find ‘neighbour’ mentioned in the ninth and tenth commandment. We must not tell lies about our neighbour or covet things that belong to our neighbour. More positively, we are to love our neighbour as ourselves (Lev 19:18, Mat 22:39). In the Good Samaritan parable Jesus taught that everyone is our neighbour, not just those in our family or ethnic group. So how can we be a good neighbour?

By all means get to know your neighbour but remember not to bother him such that he becomes weary and hates you (25:17). Be careful not to, ‘loudly bless your neighbour early in the morning’ (27:14 NIV). I once visited a man who was noting down every time his dog barked because of a dispute with his neighbour. In getting to know your neighbour, you may have opportunity to help him or her: ‘as we have opportunity let us do good to all’ (Gal 6:10). If they are sick visit them. And if they offer to help you at some time, graciously accept their offer. If you do this they will be more accepting of your offers to help. Maybe your neighbour will call upon you for help, in which case you, as a good neighbour, will not send them away saying, ‘come back tomorrow’ (3:28).

Good neighbours are hard to find, so look after your neighbours! ‘Do not devise evil against your neighbour for he dwells by you for safety’s sake’ (3:29, 11:9). ‘Better a neighbour nearby than a brother far away’ (27:10). A neighbour is well placed to help in times of emergency. One neighbour called me late one night when someone staying in his house thought she saw a burglar. Our relationship was such that he trusted me to go and check the place out- which I did and called him back. Another neighbour texted just yesterday to see how we were getting on. It is good to keep in touch with neighbours, although, that said, it is best to stay clear of an angry or foolish neighbour (22:24, 14:7).

Proverbs warns against despising your neighbour or devising evil against them- to do so is sin (3:29, 14:21, 24:28, 25:18). Only a man who lacks judgment belittles his neighbour (11:12). Some people end up in dispute and even in court with their neighbour, usually because of something said or done which was not out of love. Sure, our neighbour may offend us by word or deed, but as always, ‘a soft answers turns away wrath’ (15:1). It may be wise to say nothing (11:12). Certainly it is wise to ‘debate you case with your neighbour, and not disclose the secret to another’ (25:9). If you are quick in running to the court you may end up being shamed (25:8). It is better to talk to your neighbour before going to the authorities and to court.

Jesus tells us that when someone sins against us to go and tell him what he has done before taking the matter further (Mat 18:15). This is not easy to do, especially if we do not really know our neighbour, but it is better than starting gossip in the street or on social media. And do not resort to pay-back or vengeance: ‘If your enemy is hungry give him bread to eat (25:21), and again, ‘a soft answer turns away wrath’. As we consider our options it may be that the wisest choice is to say and do nothing: ‘a man of understanding holds his peace’ (11:12). We may not know the troubles our neighbour is facing. ‘The poor man is hated even by his own neighbour’ (14:20). We must not be such a neighbour.

**2. Friends**

‘Mum, I have no friends’. Have you heard this sad cry from a child? It goes to show that we cannot live without friends, as we have been saying. By the way, you can always tell your child that Jesus is their friend! We pray that our children will choose good friends, and that they will be good friends, but above all that they will know Jesus as their friend.

‘The righteous should choose his friends carefully’ (12:26, 14:20, Ps 1). Many children make the wrong choice, or are ‘bullied’ into a group of bad friends. The most important thing to remember and to teach your children is to always be a good friend; although we may need to act decisively, like the parents who moved their child to another school because of a bad friend. Proverbs warns against shaking hands in pledge for a stranger or even a friend (6:1, 11:15, 17:18). Just because someone wants to be your friend does not mean you have to be theirs? ‘My son, if sinners entice you do not consent’ (1:10, 16:29).

The rich has many friends, as do the famous, for obvious reasons, but many are superficial or ‘fair-weather’ friends as we call them (14:20, 19:4,6) - these days they are called ‘Face-book’ friends. People boast about the number of Face-book friends they have, but it is quality not quantity we should look for in our friends. The poor have few friends (19:7) but they may be more faithful.

Our spouse and our family are usually good friends, but our focus today is on friends outside the family. Jesus did not limit himself to family. He chose twelve men to be his friends, some being closer than others and one who actually betrayed him. From reading Proverbs and other parts of the Bible we learn that a good friend is faithful yet frank, ready to share faults yet avoids being ‘full-on’ or overbearing.

*a. Faithful*

Deep friendships are often forged early in life, especially when the young person moves out of home and away from family. I have a friend from such days- I rarely see him nowadays but when I do we still share deeply and pray together. Ideally, we do spend time with our friend. David had many brothers but it was his friend Jonathan who ‘stuck closer than a brother’ (18:24). David’s life was in danger from none other than Jonathan’s father. Yet Jonathan risked his life for his friend David (1Sam 20:33). David in turn was faithful to Jonathan. Many years after Jonathan saved his life, King David thought how he could honour this beloved friend. For Jonathan’s sake he brought his crippled son Mephibosheth into the place to eat at his table (2 Sam 9).

A faithful friend loves at all times: ‘A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity’ (17:17). A friend in need is a friend indeed. Some soldiers formed friendships on the battle field, friendships that lasted for life. Unreliable friends are dangerous. The first line of Proverbs 18:24 is not easy to translate but one translation has, ‘a man of many companions may come to ruin’. Another has, ‘some companions are only good for idle talk’. It is when you become poor or fall upon hard times that you find out who your true friends are- and this is when your friends discover if you are a true friend or not (19:4). A faithful friend is not easy to find (20:6), so when you find one nurture the friendship.

Another friend I have is from the time spent away from my homeland in another culture. Commenting on Proverbs 27:9, Keller writes, ‘Friendship begins with discovery. We must find persons with common loves and vision’. He goes on, ‘Christian faith can create deep affinity between people who are different in every other way. That is why friendship between believers from diverse racial backgrounds can be so powerfully formative’.

*b.Frank and open*

Superficial friends engage in idle talk, joking and flattery (26:18, 19, 29:5). True friends engage in frank conversation, not flattery (22:11). They are like sharpening iron on iron (27:17). Friendships grow deeper with honest and sincere rebuke and counsel (27:5, 6, 9); but they can be destroyed very quickly when matters between friends are repeated (17:9) or when ‘whispering starts’ (16:28). Friendship involves love, and love covers a multitude of sins. Just as some matters remain between husband and wife, so some things remain between friends. If you go spreading gossip you will lose your friend. Too often we see the best of friends become the worst of enemies because, ‘an offended brother is harder to win than a strong city’ (18:19).

Yet for a friendship to grow and be a blessing there must be openness and readiness to give and to receive advice and correction. Two are better than one, ‘for if they fall, one will lift up his companion’ (Eccl 4:10). A good friend will try to turn a sinner from the error of his ways and save his soul from death (James 5:20). Such rebuke may not be appreciated at first, but ‘he who rebukes a man will find more favour afterward’ (28:23).

*c.Full-on and insensitive*

While good friends spend time together, the friendship can be killed if one oversteps the mark and becomes too ‘full-on’. Proverbs does not speak much about love but the commandment does. When we love a friend we will consider their feelings and not ‘trade on his affection’ (Kidner). Friends, like neighbours, can be too often in the other’s house (25:17). Some in the workplace become too pushy when it comes to making friends- often because they have few friends outside of work. They plan team-building weekends when some just want to be home with their family. Some want to party when others want to be quiet (27:14). ‘If I can be content when you are feeling sad I am not your friend’ (25:20: Keller). A good friend will not be so ‘full on’ as to be rowdy, boastful, superficial and joking all the time (26:18, 19).

Goods friends are concerned about supporting the other person and building them up. ‘Without the perspective of others we will never know our strengths and weaknesses’ (Keller). For believers this includes spiritual support and growth. Real friends are ready to rebuke one another and they are ready to pray for one another; ‘faithful are the wounds of a friend’ (27:6). Who will tell you the truth even when it hurts? Are you ready to accept the truth?

In closing, remember the One who openly shared his heart and life with us; Jesus Christ, the Son of God, gave his life for us. We cannot find a more faithful friend than Jesus. We can share whatever is on our heart with Jesus knowing he will listen and respond in truth and love. But he also wants us to be sharing with one another and speaking the truth in love (Eph 4:15) and bearing one another’s burdens (Gal 6:2).

**Pride and humility** Proverbs - pride and humility

The general in the Syrian army was a mighty man of valour, but was also a leper. Hearing of a prophet in the neighbouring country of Israel who could heal lepers, he set off with bags of silver and gold to see the king of Israel. The king could not help him, but the prophet Elisha offered to do so. With his cavalcade of horses and chariots, Naaman arrived at the prophet’s house, only to be met by a messenger. The prophet did not come out to greet this general, to wave his hand over his diseased body as he expected. Naaman was offended at such lack of honour. He was even more offended when the messenger told him to go and wash seven times in the Jordan. This proud man had not come all this way with bags of gold to be told to go and wash in the filthy Jordan River. Naaman was furious. He turned and went away in a rage (2Kings 5:12). If his servants had not spoken to him he would not have been healed.

Our first point in looking at the subject of pride here in the Book of Proverbs is how this sin, this lack of wisdom, is self-harming. Then we will look at how pride affects one’s neighbours, and thirdly, how pride is hated by God. ‘Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall’ (16:18). Destruction may appropriately come from any or all of these three directions- self, others, or God.

**1. Pride is self-harming**

Pride is the mother of all kinds of sin. It leads to every other vice. It is an all-round evil. It is a complete anti-God state of mind. It is state of self-absorption and self-importance such that not even God gets consideration. It was through pride that the devil became the devil. ‘Pride is to grab God’s status for one’s self (Keller). ‘I will exalt my throne above the stars of God… I will be like the Most High’ (Isa 14:13-14). Isaiah was condemning the king of Babylon, but the words can be taken as a reference to Satan. They could also refer to the sin of Adam and Eve, tempted as they were by Satan’s words, ‘you will be like God’ (Gen 3:5). The tower of Babel is another example of man trying to ‘grab God’s status for one’s self’: ‘let us make a name for ourselves’ they said (Gen 11:4). And so the sin of pride continues to this day with men and women wanting to make a name for themselves, and wanting to be like God.

Pride is one of the seven deadly sins. Pride is a special evil because it opposes the first principle of wisdom, the fear of the Lord. The proud person does not give honour to anyone else- he takes it all for himself. The proud person hates any form of authority. We see children rebelling against parents as they assert their selfish independence. Young adults assert their selfish independence against authorities like teachers and police. They proudly declare, ‘No one is going to tell me what to do; I can do what I like’. From child through to adult, and into old age, pride leads to rebellion against God and his commandments, against God and his wisdom; fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

While pride focusses on self, it actually blinds us to self; it blinds us to our flaws. In our pride we refuse to listen to advice or correction from others (13:18, 15:12). A proud heart places ‘me’ at the centre of the universe. If things fall apart it is always the fault of someone else or something else. Pride distorts our view of reality. In rejecting the advice of others, we keep making bad decisions. ‘When pride comes then comes shame’ (11:2). ‘In the mouth of a fool is a rod of pride’ (14:4). ‘Pride goes before destruction’ (16:18). Pride almost cost Naaman healing from his dreaded disease. Have you ever come to grief because of pride? I-did-it-my-way-people often end up suffering the fruits of their folly.

What goes up must come down, and what bows down will be lifted up. Those who refuse to bow down will not be lifted up. Those who exalt themselves will be brought low. ‘A man’s pride will bring him low’ (29:23). Pride robs a person of the very status they presumed to have. Pride is all about presumption, about ‘thinking of oneself more highly than we ought’ (Rom 12:3). Blowing you own trumpet can be like blowing your own balloon- it gets bigger and bigger until, Bang! And all is gone. ‘Do not be wise in your own eyes (26:12). ‘Let another man praise you and not your own mouth, a stranger and not your own lips’ (27:2).

‘Do not exalt yourself in the presence of the king, and do not stand in the place of the great’ (25:6). Jesus told a parable with the same lesson: ‘whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted’ (Mat 23:12, Luke 14:11). Jesus is a teacher of wisdom. Jesus is an example of wisdom. Jesus is the wisdom of God. James writes, ‘Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up’, and Peter writes the same (James 4:10, 1Peter 5:6). Pride is most deadly when it keeps us from humbling ourselves before the Lord.

We mentioned the example of Jesus. If any man had reason to be exalting himself it was Jesus, the Son of God. Kings and their sons are usually proud men. But not King Jesus, the Son of God. His life and death were marked by humility, not pride. He was born in a stable and grew up in a backward village in the hills. He had no say in these matters of course, but he was not ashamed of them. Jesus said he came not to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45). Becoming a man in itself was a great humiliation for Jesus but he did not rebel against his Father. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross. ‘Therefore God also highly exalted him’ (Phil 2:8, 9). If you are looking for an example of a humble life, a life devoid of pride, look no further than Jesus. Paul actually writes, ‘let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus’ (Phil 2:5).

**2. Pride affects others**

Pride did not keep Jesus from associating with the poor and needy, with tax-collectors and prostitutes. But it kept the Pharisees from doing so, and it keeps many today from associating with people they consider of lower status in society. Have you come across a person who boasts about the famous people they have met, or almost met? I have. A fellow invited me to his home where I noticed photos of him with rich and famous people lining the walls. Then he brought out albums full of such photos- although I had to ask him who some of the ‘famous’ people were! He was so proud of these photos of himself standing next to important people. I later heard that he was accused of getting a bit too close to some young ladies in his ‘selfies’.

Pride is destructive to relationships. In exalting themselves, proud people look down on others- not physically because they may not be tall, but socially. Often they do not even notice other people. They see others as a means to an end- ‘will this person improve my status in society?’ Pride makes sympathy nearly impossible. Proud people are arrogant; they are always putting others down. Such an attitude inevitably leads to strife. ‘By pride comes nothing but strife’ (13:10). ‘He who is of a proud heart stirs up strife’ (28:25).

‘Cast out the scoffer and contention will leave; yes, strife and reproach will cease’ (22:10). ‘A scoffer does not love one who corrects him’ (15:12, 13:1). A proud and haughty person is called a ‘scoffer’ here in Proverbs; a person who ‘acts with arrogant pride’ (21:24). Driven by the need to be right all the time, the need to win every argument, the arrogant person often resorts to scoffing. Sensing they might lose an argument they resort to personal attack and abuse. The proud person is devastated whenever they lose an argument or things do not go their way. Pride prevents them from seeing wisdom in any idea that is not theirs; it prevents them from gaining wisdom, full stop!

‘Make no friendship with an angry man, and with a furious man do not go’ (22:24). They were brave men who spoke to Naaman in his rage. Being a man of strife, people tend to stay clear of the proud person. They do not listen to anyone anyway! The proud lose friends at a rapid rate- they fail to heed wisdom that says, ‘better to lose an argument than lose a friend’. Pride robs one of the very status it presumes. What is the point of being at the head of the table when no one else is sitting down?

**3. Pride hated by God**

‘Pride not only looks down on others; it also fails to look upward’, to look towards God and walk in the fear of the Lord. The Hebrew word for pride is the same word used to describe the majesty of God. God is the exalted One, and rightly so. God is a jealous God who tolerates no rivals. Is God proud? If so he has reason to be; he is the creator of the universe, the all-powerful ruler of the universe. But we have already spoken of the humility of God the Son.

There is place for an element of pride when it comes to achievements and to family. But in the end we must give thanks to God, and give all the glory. It is possible to exhibit false modesty, to be proud of being humble! Do not let pride cloud your view of reality. Pride must never lead to blaming God, or to rebellion against God- remember Satan, and Adam and Eve. If we begin to exalt ourselves before God his hand of judgment will be swift. Such pride is sin, sin that God hates.

‘Before destruction the heart of a man is haughty, and before honour is humility’ (18:12). This verse does not specify who destroys the heart, but ultimately it is God because, ‘everyone proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord’ (16:5). This verse goes on to assure the proud that they will not go unpunished. ‘A haughty look, proud heart, and the lamp/plowing of the wicked are sin’ (21:4).

‘Surely He scorns the scornful but gives grace to the humble’ (3:34). Whatever ‘pride’ God has, he delights to bless his people. God is powerful to bless but he will not bless those who exalt themselves against him and make themselves enemies of God. It is interesting that not only James, but also Peter, refer to Proverbs 3:34: ‘God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble’ (James 4:6, 1Peter 5:5). Peter does so in the context of young people submitting to elders, and of all of us humbling ourselves under the mighty hand of God. James refers to this proverb in the context of fights and quarrels within the fellowship, and again in submitting to God.

‘There is a generation that is pure in its own eyes, yet is not washed from its filthiness. There is a generation- Oh, how lofty are their eyes! And their eyelids are lifted up’ (30:12, 13). Do you think Agur had our generation in mind when he wrote these words? If you see more rebellion against authority, and more pride within society today, you could be right. Why? Because people are no longer humbling themselves before the Lord, no longer walking in the fear of the Lord.

Let us not forget what happened in Eden; our first parents wanted to be like God. They rebelled against God and disobeyed his command. Many are doing just this today. They reject God and his word. Through science and philosophy, riches and fame, they thumb their nose at God. They trust in themselves rather than God (3:5, 6). And they are suffering the consequences- strife, shame, and suicide. We did read about ‘destruction’!

Those who fear the Lord do not fear man or fear nature. Proud people are ruled by worldly fears. When you know that your life is in God’s hands, and that God gives grace to the humble, you will know the peace of God in your heart. You will experience the blessings of Almighty God, whom you know as your heavenly Father. God richly rewards those who humble themselves before him. He promises to lift them up (Mat 23:12, Luke 18:14). Those who humble themselves confess their sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. He will lift them so high that they will sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:6).

It is by grace, and grace alone, that we are saved. Pride is the greatest barrier to grace, so let us get rid of pride from our hearts. Stop looking down on others, stop getting upset when you are not given the recognition you think you deserve, stop looking out for your own interests and start looking to the interests of others (Phil 2:4), and start looking to the interests of Jesus Christ (Phil 2:21). May the Lord help us in killing our pride, in destroying the old man and putting on the new man which boasts only in Jesus Christ our Lord (Gal 6:14).

**Words** Proverbs - on words, lips, and mouth

Of the five chapters in the NT book of wisdom, one is about taming the tongue. In the book of James we read of the tongue boasting great things though it is but a little member of the body. ‘It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison’ (James 3:8). Have you thought of your tongue in this way? Words start wars- but thankfully words also bring peace. Words are powerful: ‘death and life are in the power of the tongue’ (18:21). It is often said that the pen is mightier than the sword. Words are even more powerful. Friends are lost, marriages are broken, fellowships are destroyed, and nations go to war because of spoken words (25:18). It will come as no surprise to discover that many sayings in the Book of Proverbs focus on words, or related terms like the mouth, the tongue, and the lips. Chapters 10, 12 and 26 contain many proverbs about the mouth and about words.

Biologists get excited when they hear animals communicating by sounds. Recently there was great excitement at a whale supposedly counting 1, 2, 3! Parrots can be taught to say words. But verbal communication belongs uniquely to human beings because we are made in the image of God. God communicates to us verbally; we dare not rely on feelings to guide us. Adam heard the voice of the Lord calling to him, ‘Where are you?’ God made us with the ability to communicate to one another verbally. He gave us a mouth, a tongue and lips by which we can form words. But it is the heart that directs and controls the words we speak.

Sin corrupted the heart of man leading to corruption in our communication. Sin continues to corrupt our communication even when we speak the same language. Communication without sin, or speaking only what is pure, is seen only in the only perfect man, Jesus Christ our Lord. But God also used men like Solomon to impart wisdom with regard to the use of our tongue.

One of the commandments that Moses received was, ‘Do not bear false witness against your neighbour’; in other words, ‘do not tell lies’ (Exod 20:16). Wisdom tells us the same thing (14:5). Sinful hearts give rise to lying lips. Imagine a society in which no lies were ever told; courts and juries would no longer be necessary. Jesus is the Truth, and those who follow Jesus must speak the truth- the whole truth and nothing but the truth. But this does not mean telling the whole world about a private matter. We must speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15). There are times when we should refrain from speaking even the truth. Much of the wisdom we find in the Bible can be summed up by saying that before you speak ask yourself, ‘is it true, is it kind, is it necessary’. These will be our three points as we look at wisdom about words in the Book of Proverbs.

**1. Is it true?**

The foolishness of speaking lies is addressed in numerous proverbs. The Lord hates a lying tongue (6:17,19). ‘Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord’ (12:22). Lying lips arise from perverse thinking (11:20). Why do people tell lies to one another? Because of pride, the sin of pride. They want to be appear better than they are. Or they may want to avoid punishment. When asked, ‘who broke the window?’ the boy will say, ‘not me’ in order to escape punishment. He may add to the lie by mentioning the name of another boy. One lie soon leads to another until, as the Proverbs say, the liar has brought himself to ruin (21:6, 21:28, 26:28). ‘Lips that lie will not escape punishment’ (19:5, 19:9).

Do not think that only boys tell lies. A prominent lawyer told a court that someone else was driving his car when it was photographed speeding. Refusing to pay the fine, he went to court with this lie. But his lie was exposed and he was sent to jail for perjury. ‘A disreputable or worthless witness scorns justice’ (19:28). A politician is in jail because of lies he told in court. Shame has overtaken many who tell lies even if not caught by authorities. Let them remember, ‘the lying tongue is but for a moment’ (12:19). In trying to save themselves, and maybe destroy others with their lies, in the end they suffered shame and the loss (12:13). Be sure your sin will find you out (Num 32:23). Shame covers the face of those who habitually tell lies. They cannot be trusted and no one wants to know them, apart from other liars. A liar is shunned because people do not want to be hurt by his/her lies. Let us be like Agur who prayed, ‘Remove falsehood and lies far from me’ (30:8). Better to be a poor man than be a liar (19:22).

The rich young ruler claimed to be blameless with regard to bearing false witness, and you may do the same. But what about words that twist or question the truth. What about so called ‘little white lies’, about telling your child to say you are not at home when you are. ‘There is no such thing as a harmless lie. And God’s Spirit will never work through dishonest words, however you lie to yourself about your motives’ writes Keller. What about deceit, slander and innuendo? Deceit involves words intended to mislead. ‘Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil’ (12:20). ‘The folly of fools is deceit’ (14:8). Hatred can be covered by deceit (26: 24, 26). We can be clever at misusing words even if not actually telling a lie. The intention to deceive is sin.

To slander is to spread a false report; ‘whoever spreads slander is a fool’ (10:18). Again, the lie may not be blatant but hidden in questions and suggestions. ‘A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends’ (16:28). In politics we hear of opponents ‘digging up dirt’. Solomon says, ‘An ungodly man digs up evil and it is on his lips like a burning fire’ (16:27). It is not only politicians who ‘dig up dirt’ to throw at others. Some do such things even to their spouse; it may be the truth, but spoken in anger it is sin.

As with lies, deceit also has its rewards, unpleasant and destructive rewards. ‘Bread gained by deceit is sweet to a man, but afterwards his mouth will be filled will gravel’ (20:17). A small book written about liberal theology is called ‘a mouth full of pebbles’. There are theologians who twist the words of the Bible in order to deceive. Hatred can be covered by deceit but such wickedness will be ‘revealed before the assembly’ (26:26). Lies and deceit hide hatred in the heart but ‘whoever spreads slander is a fool’ (10:18). Jesus said, “Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’, and your ‘no’, ‘no’. For whatever is more than these is from the evil one” (Mat 5:37).

**2. Is it kind?**

Words have power to harm and hurt long before they actually kill – as they can do (11:9, 12:6, 12:18, 18:21). Lies can lead to an innocent person being condemned, but more often they cut deep into the heart of a person, destroying their self-esteem, and even leading them to depression or suicide. ‘The hypocrite with his mouth destroys his neighbour’ (11:9). The mouth of the wicked can even destroy a city (11:11). Cutting words leave a scar, just like a sword. Once spoken, words cannot be taken back, so carefully consider your words before you speak.

Most words that hurt are spoken in the heat of an argument; they are spoken in anger. ‘In your anger do not sin’; do not sin in word or deed (Eph 4:26). ‘The tongue of the righteous uses knowledge rightly but the mouth of fools pour forth foolishness’ (15:2). Just because you know something does not mean you have to tell everyone, or that you have to use that knowledge to win an argument. As they say, you may win the argument but lose a friend.

Flattery also has the power to hurt someone. Flattery is for fools, not for the wise to engage in, or to listen to (20:19, 26; 28, 29:5, Ps 12:2). Flattery is not new- we find it here in Proverbs- but we live in a day of language inflation. When average grades become ‘excellent’ and good grades are ‘fantastic’ what word do we use for exceptionally high grades? Telling someone they are excellent when they are just average is deceptive and not helpful. By all means offer praise but refrain from flattery.

Words have the power to hurt and to heal. ‘The tongue of the wise promotes health’ (12:18). ‘Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression but a good word makes it glad’ (12:25). ‘Pleasant words are like honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones’ (16:24). Depression is thought to be a sickness of modern man- and treatment of it thought to reside in modern medicine. I listened to a discussion about a study of anti-depressant medications which said that 30% improved on a sugar-pill placebo. I am not such a doctor but it was interesting to hear the comment that the simple matter of seeing a doctor regularly to get an anti-depressant may contribute to its effectiveness. ‘He who loves purity of heart and has grace on his lips, the king will be his friend’ (22:11). ‘The words of a man’s mouth are deep waters, the well spring of wisdom is a flowing brook’ (18:4). ‘The mouth of the righteous is a well of life’ (10:11). Kind words promote health. Words are powerful to heal.

Speaking the truth in love involves speaking in a timely manner. It may be the truth but saying it at the wrong time may cause harm. ‘A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver’ (25:11, 10:20). ‘A word spoken in due season, how good it is!’ (15:28, 10:32). We know how easy it is to say the wrong thing to someone who is grieving. Words should be few at such times. Some people launch into a whole scenario of how they dealt with grief. Suffering with those who suffer (1Cor 12:26) does not mean retelling how much you have suffered. Keller writes, ‘timeliness is difficult to achieve, because our natural temperaments usually incline us toward being too quick or too slow to speak’. I am sure you know the feeling! We must pray for wisdom.

In order to speak helpful words we should listen before we speak. ‘He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame on him’ (18:13, 15:28). ‘A fool has no delight in understanding, but in expressing his own heart’ (18:2). The first lecture in a counselling course will be about listening. And in counselling a husband and wife it is often necessary to first see if they are listening to one another. Try asking the husband to repeat what his wife just said to him- or vice versa! Are you a good listener? If you want to speak kind and helpful words to someone you must first listen to them.

**3. Is it necessary?**

What you say may be true but that does not mean you must say it; we are not talking about withholding the truth when it is required but about words that are timely. We speak the truth in love, not in hatred or anger. We try to use kind and gentle words, while not giving way to flattery. We try to use apt and appropriate words, understanding the power of those words- to heal or to hurt. The Lord promises to give us words to say when we are brought before authorities (Mat 10:19); He will also give us words to say on other occasions if we stop to ask him.

Do you know a man of few words? Do you consider that person wise or foolish? ‘A prudent man keeps his knowledge to himself, but the heart of fools blurts out folly’ (12:23). ‘He who has knowledge spares his words’. ‘Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace’ (17:17, 18). Much of what we know about a person is because of their words. The more the words the more the heart is revealed, for better or, more often, for worse. One who blurts out what they know, or what they think they know, is not a person with whom to share your knowledge or feelings. One who speaks in public what is a private matter is to be avoided. Those who speak without discretion are talebearers or gossips. Some people are desperate to know the latest ‘tasty morsel’ about people around them: ‘The words of a talebearer are like tasty trifles’ (18:8, 26:22). Such people are ready to set a whole forest ablaze with the tongue (26:20, James 3:6).

In order not to hurt someone, the wise person will at times hold their tongue because, ‘in many words sin is not lacking’ (10:19). It is easy to be ‘ensnared by the transgression of our lips’ (12:13). ‘He who does not stumble in word is a perfect man’ (James 3:2) so let your words be few. Let us be like the psalmist who prayed, ‘Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips’ (Ps 141:3).

The lips, remember, are the door of the heart, so ‘keep your heart with all diligence’ (4:23). We must pay heed to what enters our hearts, as well as what comes out of our mouth. ‘Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks’ (Mat 12:34). We must fill our hearts with things that are pure and holy (Phil 4:8). Meditate on God’s word day and night and you will learn words that are acceptable to God and a blessing to those around you; words of comfort, words of healing, and words of life.

**The poor and poverty** Proverbs - on poverty

What should be the attitude of a Christian towards wealth and poverty? Is it better to be rich or poor? Wealth is not evil in itself, nor is poverty pious. Both have advantages and disadvantages according to the wisdom of Proverbs. It is our attitude towards riches, and also our attitude towards the poor that are important. While many want to get rich, there are some who choose to be poor. It is interesting that the last of the four life stages for the Hindu is that of renunciation. A Hindu man can spend his life getting rich by bribery and corruption, but at the age of seventy five leaves it all to become a Sanyasi.

Since the 13th century, priests in the Roman Catholic Church have taken a vow of poverty. With great piety they renounce all private property with everything being given to the Church. In return the Church provides all their needs. Such piety is not the way of salvation of course, and Proverbs does not speak about choosing poverty, even if some point to advantages when compared to being rich. But the overall picture is one of disadvantage.

In chapter 30, and in the only prayer in the Book of Proverbs, the wise man Agur prays: “Give me neither poverty nor riches but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ or I may become poor and steal and so dishonour the name of my God” (30:8-9). Is this the last word on the matter? If not, it certainly is a good place to start! Wealth, as we have previously observed, can lead men and women to trusting in their wealth rather than trusting in the Lord (3:5, 11:28). Agur puts it bluntly: ‘Lest I be full and deny the Lord’ (30:9). Solomon would have termed this a failure to fear the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom. To deny the Lord is a serious matter according to Jesus (Mat 10:33). The rich young ruler effectively did this when he chose to keep his riches.

But what about the other choice, that of poverty. This is the subject we want to study today. You may recall a brief mention of poverty, of a man stealing to satisfy his hunger in chapter 6 verse 30. Stealing is always sin against God but a sin that can be repented of and repaid. The positive request of Agur for ‘daily bread’ or for ‘the portion allotted to me by God’ should not be overlooked. This request has a direct parallel in the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples (Mat 6:11). Agur recognised the providence of God behind all that he received. He was aware of the temptations associated with the extremes of both wealth and poverty. With his daily allotment from the hand of God he would be content. By the grace of God we can be content with whatever God has apportioned us. ‘Godliness with contentment is great gain’ (1Tim 6:6).

By way of background, we might note how the poor were treated under the law in Israel. The rich were always tempted to oppress and exploit the poor- this is man’s fallen nature. But Moses and the prophets condemned such oppression. Moses said that there will always be poor among you, but commanded the people to be generous towards their poor and needy brothers in the land (Deut 15:11). The Sabbath day, the Sabbath year, and the Jubilee were instituted, in part, to stop such oppression; rest on the seventh day, release of slaves in the seventh year, and return to ancestral land in the Jubilee.

**1. Benefits of poverty**

There are spiritual benefits in that poverty avoids the danger of trusting in wealth, although one’s attitude towards poverty must also be considered. Poverty may lead to greater dependence on the Lord; although the teaching that poverty somehow leads to spiritual perfection is not found in Proverbs or anywhere else in the Bible.

There are a number of ‘better than’ proverbs that point to benefits regarding character. ‘Better a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure with wrath’ (15:16). ‘Better a dinner of vegetables with love than a fatted calf with hatred’ (15:17). ‘Better the poor who walks in his integrity than one perverse in his ways, though he be rich’ (28:6).The poor person does not fear being kidnapped and loses no sleep in guarding his possessions (13:8). The poor man who trusts in the Lord is contented and happy. Money cannot buy such happiness.

**2. Pitfalls of poverty**

While wealth provides a buffer against the vicissitudes of life, the poor have no such buffer- apart from the Lord. ‘The rich man’s wealth is his strong city; the destruction of the poor is their poverty’ (10:15). But it is also true that, ‘the name of the Lord is a strong tower’ for those who run to him (18:10). The poor person is vulnerable when they become sick and cannot work, or when there is no opportunity to work. If they have to borrow they can become burdened by debt, especially if charged excessive rates of interest. Under Mosaic Law an indebted man could sell himself into slavery until a kinsman-redeemer came to help, or until the next Sabbath year. In this way inter-generational poverty could be avoided.

Another pitfall of poverty is that of ostracism and the lack of friends. Not only does the rich man look down on the poor man- contrary to the teaching of Proverbs (14:31, 17:5)- but the poor man is hated even by his neighbour (14:20, 19:4,7). The poor person has few friends, but at least they are genuine friends! As Christians, whether rich or poor, we should consider our attitude towards poor people in our community, not just our giving of help but of being friends.

Defining poverty and determining just who is poor is a difficult task. Some governments set a poverty line based on income. Some see it as a matter of having sufficient food, clothes and shelter, with the additional concern for education. Education is a pathway out of poverty. Agur writes about food and about being tempted to steal (30:8-9). Other proverbs refer to hunger (19:15). But there are people who consider themselves poor if they are denied what their rich neighbours have. They are poor if they do not have the latest mobile phone or a new car. I felt rebuked when I displayed my old boots in front of a class of village boys, when some of them had no shoes at all.

**3. Causes of poverty**

Many books have been written about poverty and its causes. They offer various remedies for overcoming poverty. Governments and various secular agencies work to eradicate poverty- but poverty continues. Have the causes been properly identified? Clearly the cause must be diagnosed if effective treatment is to be given. The wisdom found here in Proverbs speaks of poverty and its causes, remembering that the ‘fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’ with regard to poverty, as with all matters of human activity. Most causes of poverty can be traced back to sin, sin on the part of rich and poor alike.

When God brought his people into the Promised Land every man was allocated a plot of land- except the Levites. With this resource he could grow food or keep livestock in order to feed and clothe his family (28:19). How then did anyone become poor? This very proverb gives one reason- frivolity or chasing fantasies (cf.14:23). But we will first look at the impact of natural disasters. Drought can drive people from their land as we well know. Disaster came upon Job and reduced him to poverty - through no fault of his own. In such situations we also learn from Job’s ‘comforters’ how not to help a poor person. Proverbs 17:5 warns against gloating over disaster or mocking the poor. Sickness or death of the breadwinner can also lead to poverty. Widows and orphans are most vulnerable to poverty (James 1:27). Compassion, not contempt, is demanded in such situations.

Disaster can have a human cause. Conflict and war can lead to poverty. Other forms of injustice can also lead to poverty. ‘A poor man’s field may produce abundant food, but injustice sweeps it away’ (13:23 NIV). Unjust taxes and exorbitant interest rates amount to oppression of a man working to provide for his family. Kings are specifically warned against oppression of the poor (17:15, 31:4, 5). Remember King Ahab grabbing Naboth’s vineyard.

A man may become poor through these causes that are beyond his control, but some men bring poverty upon themselves. Could the prodigal son blame anyone but himself for his poverty, for being reduced to eating pig food? He squandered all his money, indeed his inheritance, on wild living. Through overindulgence, through living ‘the good life’, some bring themselves into poverty: ‘He who loves wine and oil will not be rich’ (21:17, 23:20-21). In our society it is all too easy to live beyond your means. Temptations abound for both legitimate spending as well as drinking, drugs, gambling and other ‘pleasures’. Alcohol consumes money directly, and indirectly leads to inability to work and earn money. Drugs are a cause of chronic poverty, and crime. Some become poor because they refuse to listen to advice. ‘He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame’ (13:18). Divorce leads many into poverty, but will they listen to advice?

Finally there is laziness, a politically incorrect word these days but a word found here in Proverbs. In Proverbs 6 the sluggard son was soundly reprimanded. He was told, ‘a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep- and poverty will come upon you like a bandit’ (6:10-11 NIV, 20:13, 24:30-34). There is no avoiding wisdom which says, ‘he who has a slack hand becomes poor’ (10:4) and ‘an idle person will suffer hunger’ (19:15). In Proverbs 26:13-16 we hear a feeble excuse for not working: ‘there is lion in the road!’ I wonder if any bosses have heard such an excuse. Some are too proud to work- they are wise in their own eyes; ‘his hands refuse to labour (21:25). Try to make such a man work and it is like ‘vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes’ (10:26). ‘The way of the lazy man is like a hedge of thorns’ (15:19). The lazy man is pictured turning on his bed like a door on its hinges, and being too lazy to even lift food to his mouth. He is certainly too lazy to cook anything (12:27).

Should laziness be rewarded? Idleness is called sin; the command is ‘if a man will not work, neither shall he eat’ (2Thess 3:9). Of course, as Keller states, ‘oppression, calamity and responsibility are tightly merged and intertwined’ with, ‘a person born into a poor community likely to experience poor health and social pressure to dabble in wine and drugs’; but we must, with God-given wisdom, try to untangle such factors and not reward laziness. If education is needed then provide it. If jobs are needed then provide them, but do not reward what is a sinful attitude and behaviour.

**4. Attitude towards the poor**

We must not turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to the cry of the poor around us. There are sins of omission as well as commission. ‘The righteous considers the cause of the poor, but the wicked does not understand such knowledge’ (29:7). ‘He who gives to the poor will not lack’ (29:27). Christians are known as people who care for the poor, and rightly so (James 1:27). Other religions leave the poor to their fate, as this proverb indicates. Christians advocate for the needs of the poor when it comes to injustice; Christian advocacy against ‘dangerous climate change’, however, is seriously misplaced.

We must be wise however, in assessing the real need, noting the causes just mentioned. So how do we help? In the OT families took responsibility under the kinsman-redeemer system. There was also the tithe that went to support the Levites and the poor. In the NT also a man is to provide for the needs of his own household (1Tim 5:8). There was also church money, money given to the apostles so they could help widows and others in need (Acts 2:45, 6:1). In organising the church in Geneva, Calvin was active, through the deacons, in helping refugees and other needy people. There was no government help in Geneva.

In closing we note that any one of us could be reduced to poverty at any time- remember Job. The wisdom of Proverbs, as well as the teaching of Jesus and the apostles, is that of compassion and sharing of resources. ‘As we have opportunity let us do good to all men, especially those of the household of faith’ (Gal 6:10). Remember, all that we have in the bank really belongs to the Lord, not us. This is the radical teaching of the Bible. This is the economy demanded among the people of God. This is the kingdom of heaven proclaimed by Jesus.

**Agur on arrogance** Proverbs 30:1-6

If fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, as declared in the Bible, then the beginning of foolishness is failure to fear the Lord. When we look to the stars, or to the mountains, or to the waves, we have reason to fear. Almost every week we hear of a natural disaster killing lots of people; over a hundred people were killed in this last week in floods and landslides in Japan.

The disciples of Jesus were terrified as a storm battered their boat. When Jesus rebuked the wind and the waves they were even more terrified, terrified of the One who commands the wind and the waves and they obey him (Mat 8:27). Many people say they do not believe in God, but watch what they do when the plane they are in has to crash land!

Job was a man of God, but even he rather arrogantly questioned almighty God. Listen to how God answered him out of the whirlwind: ‘Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Who shut up the sea with its doors? Have you commanded the morning since your days began?’(Job 38). Job was from the land of Uz. We do not know exactly where Agur was from, but, like Job, he was a non-Israelite. Balaam was another non-Israelite sage or wise man. Agur was the son of Jakeh; neither of these names are found elsewhere in the Bible (30:1).

The first verse of Proverbs 30 is notoriously difficult to translate. The word translated ‘utterance’ or ‘oracle’ is ‘*massa*’ in the Hebrew. If taken as a proper noun it may refer to Ishmael’s son called Massa- so it would read, ‘Agur the son of Jakeh of Massa’ (Gen 25:14). His clan wandered to the east in Arabia. Job was from the East (Job 1:3). The wisdom of Agur is not unlike the wisdom of Job, as we will see. It is also similar to the wisdom of Solomon that we find in the first twenty nine chapters of Proverbs. We have already looked at some verses from chapter 30 as they applied to various themes in this book. We will now look at the wisdom of Agur as a unit.

This chapter is usually divided after verse 14 because after this we find numerical proverbs. In the LXX this chapter is split into two parts at this point. I found this detail in an essay I wrote on this chapter as part of an MA in Theology! Glancing across this chapter, we note some of the most profound wisdom in the entire book. I am looking at verse 7-9 which form a prayer, the only prayer in Proverbs. We would do well to examine our own prayers in the light of Agur’s prayer about poverty and riches. This prayer and other parts of this chapter are reflected in the Lord’s Prayer, as we will note in our study. Let us now look at these verses under the subheadings: humble confession, hallowed be your name, and holy word.

**1. Humble confession**

Agur begins his words with a personal reflection. ‘Surely I am more stupid than any man, and do not have the understanding of a man’ (30:2). Some translations, the ESV included, take the nouns in the latter part of verse 1 as common nouns and translate rather than transliterate these words; the words Ithiel and Ucal. If these are proper nouns or names, nothing is known as to whose these two people are. Sages often had students so they may refer to students of Agur. But if we translate these two words we come up with words found in the ESV: ‘The man declares, I am weary, O God; I am weary, O God, and worn out’ (30:1 ESV). These words would then form the beginning of Agur’s utterance and personal reflection. They may point to ‘the futility of trying to use human resources to come to a knowledge of God’.

Ultimately, as the writer to the Hebrews says, ‘by faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which are visible’ (Heb 11:3). With such faith, and such knowledge, we do not have to resort to inventing ‘black holes’ in the universe in order to answer our questions. While it is by faith we understand creation *ex nihilo*, Paul says that God’s invisible attributes, his eternal power and majesty, are clearly seen in the creation, so no one has an excuse for not believing in the creator God (Rom 1:20). Believing in the redeemer God is the logical next step, but is also a ‘faith step’.

In Psalm 73 Asaph confessed to envying the wicked and their trouble-free life, such that he started accusing God of failing to provide. Again we think of Job, and now of Agur. Asaph described himself as being like a brute beast before God because of his blindness regarding the end of the wicked (Ps 73:22). Agur speaks in the same way saying, ‘Surely I am more stupid/brutish than any man’ (30:2). Agur confesses to lacking understanding and wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One in particular (30:3).

God’s ways are higher, much higher, than our ways said the prophet, but so often we think we know God’s ways (Isa 55:9). Job thought this but later confessed, ‘where can wisdom be found, where is the place of understanding?’ and then, ‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’ (Job 28:12, 28). Like gold, wisdom is hidden; it is hidden in God and we must search, even crawling on our bellies, to find what is more precious than gold. The fear of the Lord and the beginning of wisdom, begins with humbling ourselves before the Lord. This is just what Agur does, what Job did, and what you must do. ‘Humble yourself before the Lord and he will lift you up’ (James 4:10).

The first of the doctrines of grace set forth in the five points of Calvinism is the doctrine of total depravity, the recognition that we are born in sin, born with a corrupt, sinful nature. We hear as much about this doctrine today as we hear sermons on Psalm 73:22, on being like a brute beast before the Lord- although we are happy to hear sermons on the ‘prodigal son’, while ever the term ‘prodigal’ is applied to anyone but ourself!

**2. Hallowed be your name**

Agur felt he had no wisdom or knowledge of God. He felt he was worthless- a nobody. There is no indication of suffering like that of Job but he felt a lot like Job. Job had his friends discouraging him. Some think Agur was being somewhat sarcastic towards Ithiel and Ucal. Self- deprecation turns to reflection upon the creation as we come to verse 4 in this oracle. It is as if Agur stepped outside his tent and, like Abraham, saw the expanse of the heavens (30:4, Gen 15:5). In seeing a mighty windstorm or crashing waves, God’s servant may be lifted out of despair and questioning into a humble and trusting relationship with God again.

It is wise to remind ourselves that God is in heaven and we are on earth (Eccl 5:2). In Job it is God who speaks of his power displayed in the creation (Job 38), and some scholars think it is God who is posing the four rhetorical questions here in verse 4. It is God bringing these thoughts to the humble heart of Agur. God gives grace to the humble. ‘He who humbles himself will be lifted up’ said another wise man called Jesus (Mat 23:12). When you feel insignificant, when you feel like you are drowning in the troubles of life, help is near at hand; help in the form of the almighty and compassionate God of creation and redemption. Reflecting on God’s greatness and love will lift you out of despair and back into the word of God.

The final question in verse 4 is surprising in that it does not clearly answer the four ‘who’ questions with a strong, ‘the Lord is his name!’ Instead we hear, ‘What is his name…surely you know?’ Again it is like God questioning Job (Job 38:4-5), but maybe Agur is reprimanding himself. Our name is something personal; it is part of who we are. If someone calls ‘Peter’ I do not answer because my name is ‘Dennis’. Moses wanted to know what to call God when he went back to Egypt; God said, ‘I am who I am’ or Yahweh (Exod 3:14). The Jews came to fear God’s name such that they did not utter this name. A far cry indeed from people today who readily utter God’s name in vain. Some pray, ‘Hallowed be your name’ and then go and use God’s name in an unholy way. Whenever we use God’s name we do so with reverence and awe because ‘our God is a consuming fire’ (Heb 12:29).

‘What is his Son’s name’ (30:4). This reference to ‘his Son’ is unexpected and unique in the OT. In establishing someone’s identity we often ask their father’s name, but not their son’s name. Jesus is identified as the Son of David and the Son of God. Along with this unique identification, he also had a name with a meaning: Jesus means ‘one who saves’. These names tell us a lot about Jesus and who is. With regard to God, we cannot know God unless the Son chooses to reveal Him (Mat 11:27). This call by Agur to know the Son’s name may be a cry to have an intermediary, one who will have access to God since he is in heaven. Jesus is our great High Priest who has passed through the heavens (Heb 4:14).

**5. Holy word**

“If verses 2-4 make the point that true wisdom includes recognising what you do not know, then the affirmation in verse 5 that ‘every word of God proves true’ is being used to argue that the wise should not claim more knowledge for themselves than has really been granted them by God. It is not wise to pretend you have answers to every conceivable question.”

Some people are into self- medication in a big way, and are sharing their supposed knowledge of medical remedies with all who will listen. Many people are into self-religion, and are sharing their supposed knowledge of life and death will all who will listen. Few are into God’s word and sharing the truth of life and death with those who will listen. But this is what we are called to do! We do not share man’s wisdom because it is worthless. We share the wisdom of God, as found in the Bible, because it is heavenly wisdom, wisdom that is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits and without partiality or hypocrisy’ (James 3:17).

Have you ever listened to someone confidently advising you when you know what they are saying is wrong? Probably not, because you will argue with them, but you may have heard them advising others and been amazed at how convincing they are with their lies. If we do not know we should humbly say, ‘I don’t know’, but some people will never utter such words.

In his humility Agur turned to the creation; he stood in awe of the sovereign God of creation. He then turned to the word of God saying, ‘Every word of God is tested or true’ (30:5). Everyone is searching for truth, but few search in the right place. Agur did, and found that God is ‘a shield to those who put their trust in him’ (30:5). ‘The aim of revelation is to promote trust, not bare knowledge of God’ writes Kidner. The Psalmist writes, ‘The word of God is proven; he is a shield to all who trust in Him’ (Ps 18:30). Paul’s shield of faith in Ephesians 6:16 connects shield and trust, as does this proverb. As the old hymn reminds us, standing on the promises of God that we find in the Bible we will not fall.

Agur warns against arrogantly adding to his words, ‘Lest he rebuke you’ (30:6). Moses warns us not to add to God’s words or to take from them (Deut 4:2); John does the same in Revelation 22:18-19. God’s word is perfect. Every word is pure gold. It is useful for correction and instruction in righteousness (2Tim 3:16). If you are wise, and want to be delivered from evil, you will go to God’s word whenever you feel overwhelmed by grief, or trouble, or temptation.

**A prayer and an evil generation** Proverbs 30:7-14

The daily diet of every believer will include prayer and Bible reading. ‘Read your Bible, pray every day, and you will grow, grow, grow’ is what the children sing. The disciples saw Jesus praying and asked him to teach them how to pray; and so we have the Lord’s Prayer, in which we address ‘our Father in heaven’. We learn from Agur, and other wisdom writers, that God is in heaven (30:4, Eccl 5:2); our prayers should reflect this truth.

The Lord’s Prayer has six petitions or requests. ‘Hallowed be your name’ is the first; we reflected on God’s name and his Son’s name in verse 4. The second petition is, ‘Your kingdom come’, and the third, ‘Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’. The fourth petition is, ‘Give us this day our daily bread’, a petition reflected here in Agur’s prayer: ‘Feed me with the food allotted to me’ (30:8). The fifth petition is, ‘Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors’, and the sixth is, ‘Lead us not into temptation’, which is reflected in Agur’s, ‘Remove falsehood and lies far from me’ (30:8). Agur was serious about not breaking God’s holy law, especially in regard to lies and stealing, and above all, afraid of denying God altogether.

We come to the only prayer in the whole of Proverbs, a prayer by the wise man Agur, son of Jakeh. We have seen this wise man’s humility, and reverence for God and his word. His concern about lies first appears in verse 6 where adding to God’s word was regarded as lying. All sin, including lying, is against God, and as such the liar will be rebuked by God (30:6).

Our second point will focus on a generation or a group of people that is extremely arrogant. Thinking only of themselves, they curse their parents and devour the poor, making them ripe for divine judgment.

**1. Prayer with two petitions**

Agur worshipped God the creator. He also knew God’s trustworthy revelation in his word. He prayed to the living and true God: ‘Two things I request of you’ (30:7). His first request is that God would keep him from lying, from telling lies or trying to deceive people in any way. He would not be so foolish as to lie to God, would he? He spoke of anyone adding to God’s word as a liar (30:6). Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites, basically liars. They were liars when it came to recognising and worshipping Jesus. Falsehood is serious sin. It is serious whether directed towards God’s Son or other people. God demands honesty and integrity in his people.

It is Satan who loves lies. He is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). Just as we pray, ‘Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil’, so Agur prayed, ‘Keep me from falsehood and lies’ (30:8). ‘Whoever guards his mouth keeps his soul from trouble’ said Solomon (21:23). These wise men do not speak of little lies and big lies. All lies offend Jesus because he is the truth. We must worship God in spirit and in truth. Agur knew, as I trust you also know, that lies and falsehood mean Satan has succeeded in tempting you.

Agur’s admission of being foolish in the first few verses of this chapter may be because he was guilty of lying. How blessed we are if our hearts respond to sin with contrition and confession. Too often one lie leads to another until we are drowning in lies. On the other hand, Agur may have felt convicted of coveting, or trusting in riches rather than trusting in God, like Asaph in Psalm 73. Job was a very rich man but there was no indication that he trusted in his riches. Agur may have been different, but he had certainly learned wisdom by the time he uttered this prayer.

Agur’s second request was as unusual as the first; although it should not surprise us if we really understand what we are praying in the Lord’s Prayer. ‘Give us this day our daily bread’ is a prayer that, in the first instance, recognises God as the giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17), including every mouthful of food. This is why we give thanks for the food we eat, and teach our children to do the same.

Secondly, this prayer is for sufficiency of food, not for abundance such that we can take some and throw some away. We ask for ‘daily bread’ and God supplies ‘daily bread’. The Israelites learnt this with the manna in the wilderness. The greedy ones who wanted to store up the manna were rebuked by God. Jesus spoke of a farmer who had bumper crops so built bigger barns to store his crop. God called him a fool because he thought he could live without God’s help. That very night he died! ‘One’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses’ said Jesus (Luke 12:15). That farmer should have reflected on Agur’s prayer, and so should you!

Too many Christians get caught up in accumulating the things of this world, just like their pagan neighbours. Despite the warning of Moses, the Israelites soon forget God when they came into the rich and fertile land of Canaan (Deut 6:16). This story has been repeated in other nations, and in the lives of many individuals whom God has blessed. Maybe you know such a person, someone who once came to church but now they are settled in their own home, busy making sure that they and their children are not missing out on anything this world offers. We could remind them of this prayer of Agur!

‘Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread’ (30:8 NIV). With God-given wisdom Agur saw the danger, the spiritual danger of both poverty and riches. Our society sees only the physical danger, the danger of obesity, which is serious enough! Riches spent feasting on fatty foods might lead to an early death but what about dead hearts? There are many for whom riches pose a more deadly risk than obesity. Many are trusting in their riches and ignoring God; but God will not be ignored.

“Lest I be full and deny you, and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’” prayed Agur (30:9). Is this not what people around us are saying today- ‘Who is the Lord?’ They blindly listen to the lie of Satan telling them that having more possessions will make them happy- ‘the more you have the happier you will be’ says Satan. Work hard and spend hard; fill you house and your life with things.

An elderly neighbour sold his house last year; it took weeks, and a dozen huge skip bins, to remove all the stuff he had accumulated. Another fellow has no place to put his two cars, caravan and boat. What about you? Are you praying with Agur not to become so ‘full’ as to deny the Lord? Are you one of those who think they will starve if the shops are closed for a day? Our shopping malls are bustling even as we gather here to worship the Lord. Do write Agur’s prayer on your wall and on your heart!

Agur saw no blessing in being poor either. If you are hungry you will be tempted to steal some food. Some might excuse such stealing, but as with lies, all stealing is sin. Agur knew that to steal even if he was hungry was to break God’s command and ‘profane the name of my God’ (30:9). What a sensitive heart this man had- sensitive to sin! He called God, ‘my God’. He was committed to honouring God’s holy name at all times. And so he prayed, ‘keep me from poverty lest I be tempted to steal’.

Does this mean all Christians should aspire to a middle- class lifestyle? Besides, what is wrong with having barns filled with grain from a bumper harvest? What is wrong with building up your bank account or investment portfolio? Jesus did not condemn the rich farmer because of his bumper harvest or his full barns *per se*. It was covetousness he condemned, and his attitude towards God. This farmer may have had needy neighbours he could have helped- there are always poor we can help. His full barns were not from his hard work; they were God’s blessing.

Followers of Jesus are most generous when it comes to helping the poor- and it should be this way! Most charity work is done by Christian’s because this is what the Bible teaches. As God blesses us, we are to be a blessing to others. ‘Whoever has this world’s goods and sees his brother in need and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him’ (1John 3:17). ‘As we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially those of the household of faith’ (Gal 6:10). If your barns are full you are in a position to help others. Be wise and listen to Agur, and to the wisdom of God. Be content with what the Lord gives you. If he gives you an abundance don’t hoard it- share it with those in need. This is the will of God.

**2. Evil generation**

The wisdom of Agur continues with a poem about an evil generation, but before this is a couplet like that found in earlier chapters of Proverbs. It warns against meddling in the affairs of others, particularly in slandering an employee before his boss. ‘It is the master’s role to handle a servant’s or a child’s misbehaviour. To interfere with that responsibility is to ask for guilt and shame. Busybodies win no popularity contests’. You may be a fellow employee dobbing in a mate, or a complete outsider. A ‘dobber’ had better be sure of the facts (often not the case) lest the tables are turned and he be found guilty. God’s law provides for harsh punishment of a false witness, even if state laws don’t.

The short poem in verse 11-14 addresses four aspects of arrogance. In the Hebrew each begins with the word ‘generation’. It pictures arrogant youths growing up to be arrogant adult members of society. Children must be taught to respect their parents and elders in general, otherwise they will grow up cursing their parents and elders. God’s law specifically condemns children who curse their mother and father (20:20, Exod 21:17, Eph 6:1-3).

Undisciplined youths grow up to be proud and arrogant individuals. They think they are always right (30:12), and more important than anyone else- they look down their noses at other people (30:13). What is most concerning is their attitude towards the poor and needy (30:14). ‘There is a generation whose teeth are swords and whose fangs/ jaws are knives’ (30:14). They deprive poor people of the land or resources they need to earn a living. ‘Those who exploit and destroy other people are beasts’. Again, God will judge those who mistreat the poor and needy because, ‘He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker’ (14:31).

Jesus spoke of the evil and adulterous generation in which he lived- spiritually adulterous (Mat 12:39). He was speaking to Pharisees. He condemned such people for neglecting matters of justice and mercy, and for devouring widows houses (Mat 23:14, 23). In his short book on wisdom James also condemns those who are proud and arrogant, and especially those who oppress the poor in order to get rich: ‘Come now you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you… the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty’ (James 5:1-4). If you want to know the grace of God in your life, you must humble yourself before the Lord and before fellow human beings. In failing to do either you are placing yourself under the wrath of Almighty God.

**Agur’s numerical proverbs** Proverbs 30:15-33

In preparing a lesson a teacher will list the things they want students to understand at the end of the lesson. A preacher lists the things they want the congregation to grasp from their sermon. Some politicians are good at listing matters they want understood (e.g. Rudd). Wise teacher that he was, Agur listed, often briefly, many things that illustrated the particular wisdom he wanted to impart in what we call numerical proverbs. Solomon used this technique (6:16) but not as much as Agur does in this chapter. When Agur prayed he said, ‘Two things I request of you’ (30:7). He lists four characteristics of an evil generation (30:11-14), although he does not actually say, ‘there are four things…’

In this second half of Proverbs 30 there are no less than five numerical proverbs, most beginning, ‘there are three things… yes four’. This ‘three, yes four’ formula points to the list not being exhaustive. The things listed are often observations of creatures and God’s creation, observations which climax in human behaviour; man being the climax of creation. Agur must have been an astute observer of nature like Solomon. Solomon spoke of trees, of animals, of birds, of creeping things and of fish (1Kings 4:33).

While they studied nature and learnt from natural things, these wise men derived their wisdom from God the creator. Tragically, the exploits of David Attenborough and other evolutionists lack such wisdom. It is disturbing to hear secular humanists justifying immoral behaviour on the basis that some animals do it. In fact, many animals demonstrate more ‘moral’ behaviour that some human beings, as a light-hearted poem I found illustrates.

Back to Agur’s earthly observations and heavenly wisdom. We have, as stated, five numerical proverbs which we will look at now, and then a closing admonition on pride and anger.

**1. Four things never satisfied**

Verse 15 begins with the number two, before going on to three and then four. The two things are two daughters of the leech- ‘Give and Give!’ The ‘two daughters’ are probably the two suckers found at the head and tail of the blood-sucking leech. The leech grows by sucking your blood if you happen to be its victim. Greedy people grow their riches by figuratively sucking the blood of other human beings. The previous poem ended on the note of the proud exploiting the poor and needy (30:14) - call them leeches if you like!

Agur goes on to list four things that are never satisfied. Firstly, the grave or Sheol never says ‘enough’ (30:16) - a solemn and sobering thought. Other wisdom reminds us that whatever we gain in this world will one day go to someone else (Ps 49:10, 17, Eccl 2:16). Secondly, the barren womb always craves a child to fulfil its basic purpose and to sustain the family line. Thirdly, desert soils soak up whatever water is poured on them, and fourthly, the fire never says, ‘Enough!’ While ever there is something to burn the fire will keep burning. Human greed is the same. While ever there is something to consume we will consume it. How is it that millionaires still want more? Have you ever heard a rich man say, ‘I have enough?’ Look at the huge pay packets given to company CEOs; and they want still more. And the gambler who wins a jackpot- does he stop gambling saying, ‘I have enough’?

Verse 17 seems to pick up on the evil generation of the previous section, a generation that ‘curses its father, and does not bless its mother’ (30:11). An eye that mocks, and a heart that scorns obedience, points to an attitude of the heart, an attitude that in fact mocks God’s holy law. The commandment says, ‘Honour your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land the Lord your God is giving you’ (Exod 20:12). Agur indicates that dishonour of parents will lead to destruction, destruction of the eye that mocks his father.

I remember as a boy, seeing a new born calf with its eyes torn out. A wedge-tail eagle suddenly swooped and tore out its eyes, before feasting on the flesh of this helpless calf. Remember how Samson’s eyes were put out. Do you sometimes wonder at the way God is judging individuals even today? Wise people will repent of their sin, be it greed, oppression, disrespect for parents or any other sin, before the hand of almighty God strikes them.

**2. Four ‘ways’ to marvel at**

This list of things for us to marvel at includes three non- human and one human wonder (30:18-19). The latter, the mystery of love, may be the climax. While we marvel at all four, it is the latter about which thousands of books have been written, the mystery of a man with a maiden. Even in the Bible we find a book on this marvel, the Song of Solomon. We marvel at God’s gift of love, at the attraction or ‘chemistry’ involved in a man and a woman becoming one flesh.

The first marvel is that of an eagle soaring in the air (30:19). The second moves back to earth with a snake on a rock, and the third to the sea with a ship moving across the water; this is not exactly God’s creation but a marvel of God- given human ingenuity. While the movement or ‘way’; of an eagle, a snake, and a ship are mysterious and wonderful, the way of a man courting a young woman is the most mysterious and wonderful.

But God’s most wonderful gift, the gift of intimate love between a man and his wife, was corrupted at the Fall. The sin of Adam and Eve led to corruption of their relationship. Hardly anyone in this world has not been touched in some way by the corruption of the marriage relationship. Agur reminds us in verse 20, as Solomon did in the opening chapters of Proverbs, of the corruption of God’s gift of sex. He reminds us of the adulterous woman whose ways destroy all that is wonderful about sex within a loving marriage relationship.

The adulterous woman regards sex like another meal- this is long before Freud and his theories about human drives! Her conscience is seared such that she simply wipes her mouth and says, ‘I have done no wrong’ (30:20). To utter such words in fact shows some sense of guilt. Call prostitution ‘the sex industry’; call adultery ‘having an affair’, call sex outside marriage what you will, it is all contrary to God’s beautiful and wonderful design for a man and a woman when they come together in life-long marriage. The way of a man with a virgin is truly wonderful. May we and our children and our friends keep it this way! Feminism, ‘me too’ movements, and the like, would be meaningless in a society that obeys the wisdom and the word of God regarding love, marriage and sex- in that order!

**3. Four recipes for social chaos**

When a commoner recently married a prince there were concerns that she would not fit into a royal household. She was given a crash course in royal protocol. A royal house can descend into chaos when a commoner does not fit in, or, as Agur puts it, when a servant reigns. Politics is not royalty but some are observing chaos with the sudden elevation of a business tycoon to president of a nation. Scripture does not endorse stratification of a society but acknowledges that the sudden elevation of a servant to the throne leads to turmoil. It is different when a servant boy is adopted and trained up for the task.

The second unbearable thing is when a fool is filled with food, and maybe drink also. We have such a picture with Nabal, the husband of Abigail- ‘Nabal’ is Hebrew for ‘fool’ (1Sam 25:25). This drunken fool almost brought disaster on his household because of the way he treated David’s men when they came in peace asking for some supplies.

The third unbearable thing is a married but unloved woman. Leah is a case in point- Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah (Gen 29:31). A husband should love his wife as his own body and to the exclusion of all others. The home of an unloved wife is unbearable. Fourthly, a maidservant who displaces her mistress makes for an unbearable household. This happened in Abraham’s household when he took the maid Hagar as his wife. His home became such an unhappy place that he allowed his wife Sarah to drive Hagar and his son away (Gen 16). This man of faith did not always act with wisdom. A ‘mistress’ will bring chaos to any home.

**4. Four little but wise creatures**

No human example is included in this list of four things that are little but wise, so we take it that a simple lesson is to be learned from the behaviour of these little creatures. We see that ‘brains are more important than brawn’. Jesus used a little child to teach his brawny, fishermen disciples humility and trust. Agur used the tiny ant to teach the importance of preparation for the future; fools just live for the present and forget about tomorrow.

From the tiny rock badger Agur teaches about security or sanctuary. This rabbit-like creature makes its home on rocky ledges where predators cannot go. The wise person knows the Lord as his place of refuge. Trusting in the Lord, little David slew the giant Goliath. Agur used the locust to teach what we can do when we co-operate and work together (cf. Eccl 4:9-12). A lone locust can easily be stopped but not a great swarm of locusts. The final small but wise creature is the spider or lizard which quietly slips into the king’s palace. A humble but persistent Christian is greatly valued by the Lord.

**5. Four stately creatures**

‘Majestic’ or ‘stately’ translate the same Hebrew word meaning, ‘those who do things well’. Leaders among beasts and men are listed by Agur in verses 29-31. The lion is well known as king of the beasts because it does not flee from any foe. ‘Greyhound’ is better translated ‘cock’, as in rooster. A rooster struts around the yard in a ‘cocky’ manner. The billy goat similarly marches around the flock ready to take on any competitors.

Finally, we have a human counterpart in a king whose troops are with him (30:31). A wise king or army general will be out in front leading his men into battle. The king who sits at home while his men are out fighting will soon fall - by the hand of the enemy or his own men or in some other way. Wise leadership is key to the success of any campaign or mission. It is key to the stability of a home, a church and a nation. In the next chapter King Lemuel recalls wisdom imparted by his mother which, if followed, would make him a successful king. A leader is entrusted with power and authority, but too often we see that, ‘power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely’.

**6. Foolish pride**

Unchecked pride leads to anger and strife. This chapter begins and ends calling for humility. David was a wise leader; he was a man after God’s own heart. But his grandson did not listen to the wisdom of his elders. He began lording it over the people, and they rebelled. Jesus had to teach his disciples humility when they started elbowing for positions of power (Mat 20:21). Leadership does not mean lording it over others. It means leading by example (cf. 30:31). Paul and James, like Agur, warn us not to exalt ourselves (Rom 12:3, James 4:10).

Fights and quarrels arise when people covet pleasures and positions of power. We must check our behaviour when we face such temptations. ‘Put your hand to your mouth’ writes Agur (30:32). He points to anger as the outcome of unchecked pride, firstly with the picture of milk or cream being churned into butter, and secondly with the certainty that wringing a nose will produce blood.

Some people love to stir up strife (15:18). They think they can gain something for themselves by such tactics. But such stirring usually backfires: ‘those who live by the sword, die by the sword’. It is easy to stir up strife but difficult to steer its progress, and even more difficult to stop it. The wise person will seek peace, not strife. Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’, not ‘blessed are the trouble makers’ (Mat 5:9). The wise will avoid anger, remembering that, ‘a soft answer turns away wrath’ (15:1) and ‘do not let the sun go down on your anger’ (Eph 4:26). Let us strive for peace and harmony through humility and righteousness.

**Wisdom of a mother** Proverbs 31

In getting a visa we are sometimes asked the name of our father. I am not sure why, but if the purpose is to judge our character would it not be better to ask the name of our mother? We all have, or have had, a mother, a woman who gave us birth, who nursed us as babies, who fed and clothed us as infants, and above all taught us how to live. If children lose, or are abandoned by, their mother they face a traumatic childhood that affects them into adulthood. Those who have a God-fearing mother are richly blessed.

Behind every great man is a great woman; often two women, a mother and a wife. As kings and rulers strut the battlefield or the political stage the contribution of these women is often forgotten, but not by God and not by men who are wise. Some women think they have to strut the political stage, or be in the board room to be recognised, but the wise woman knows this is not true. Strutting the stage of politics or business may mean neglecting one’s children. The wise woman values the praise of her husband and children more than the praise of fickle fans and friends.

We come to the closing chapter of this Book of Proverbs; indeed the climax. In the first chapter a son was urged to listen to his father’s instruction and not forsake his mother (1:8). If he refuses to listen he is regarded as a scoffer/fool who brings shame upon himself, his family and his society. Such a son may well be the product of little or no parental discipline (22:15), or, as is often the case, discipline that comes too late. Maybe you remember your father’s discipline most vividly, but the discipline and instruction of your mother was probably more formative of your character. Not that a mother’s role is all about discipline. Many of us know the sacrificial love of a mother who got up early to get our breakfast and make our lunch, and wash our clothes.

Proverbs 31 contains the words of King Lemuel, an otherwise unknown, non-Israelite king (31:1); but the wisdom expressed is that of his mother (31:1). As with Agur in the previous chapter, the word translated ‘utterance’ could also be transliterated ‘of Massa’. We will look at this wisdom under two subheadings: ‘beware of women’ and, ‘benevolence’. The remainder of the chapter, from verse 10 onwards, is an acrostic poem in which each successive verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet- from *aleph* to *tau*.

This poem describes a wife of noble character, a woman of valour, an excellent wife. Some think the poem is simply a personification of wisdom, as with ‘Lady Wisdom’ in chapter 9. Others think she is an idealized and not a real wife; still others that as an affluent woman she has little to teach the average woman. It does appear that the queen mother is advising her son about a suitable wife, a wife hard to find (31:10). However, there is wisdom here for all men looking for a wife, and for all wives as to how they should live. We will look at the characteristics of this excellent wife under two subheadings: ‘wife who works hard and is enterprising’, and, ‘wife who is worthy of honour’.

**1. Beware of women and wine**

Through giving birth, a mother has a special bond to her son. ‘Can a woman forget her nursing child and not have compassion on the child of her womb?’ (Isa 49:15). As a mother nurses her son she wonders what he will become. Some, like Hannah, make a vow to give their son to the Lord (1Sam 1:11). Solomon’s mother was aware of a vow concerning her son becoming king and acted to uphold this vow (1Kings 1:13). Lemuel’s mother made a vow and went on to teach her son heavenly wisdom. Maybe you made a vow in bringing your son for baptism. Your son may not become king but one day he will have a household to rule over.

‘Do not give your strength to women’ she told Lemuel (31:3). If Bathsheba gave this advice to Solomon he failed to listen. Solomon was a wise man, but women, foreign women, led him astray; ‘they turned his heart after other gods’ (1Kings 11:5). The ‘son’ of the early chapters of Proverbs is warned of being seduced by wayward women. Too many Christian men have been seduced by wayward women. Too many have been caught up in pornography. And too many have fallen away because they knowingly married an unbeliever (2Cor 6:14). The noble wife of Proverbs 31 is a woman who fears the Lord (31:30). This must be the first characteristic you, as a Christian, seek in the person you plan to marry.

Lemuel was advised to steer clear of extra-marital relationships lest his career be destroyed. He was also advised by his mother to steer clear of wine and intoxicating drink. A king who is a drunkard is a danger to any nation. They may forget the law and pervert the course of justice, especially in regard to the afflicted (31:5). ‘Woe to the land whose rulers are drunkards’. In 1983 Australia elected a leader who was a drunkard and became an adulterer. To our shame we tolerated this man as he corrupted society. Thankfully we are now less tolerant of adulterous and drunken politicians. Strong drink, says Lemuel, is not for kings but for poor and miserable men who want to forget their worries. Wine is viewed more as a remedy than a refreshment.

**2. Benevolence**

Lemuel’s mother also gave him some positive advice for when he became king. In those days the king was both law-maker and judge, both parliament and judiciary. Kings often focus on the rich and forget the poor. Expediency becomes more important than justice. Malevolence is seen as more expedient than benevolence. Solomon’s son failed to heed advice about benevolence when he became king and lost control of ten of the twelve tribes of Israel. A king who begins mistreating the poor will answer to their Maker (14:31).

‘Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves’ (31:8 NIV). With power comes responsibility to exercise justice and equity. Equity, not aggrandisement, is the first duty of leadership, according to Lemuel’s wise mother. The king is appointed by God and represents God as defender of the poor and needy. Remaining silent when the poor are being exploited is not good enough. God hears the cry of the poor and so must the king. Do you take note of how your rulers respond to the needs of the poor and needy? Do you take note of how much our government gives in foreign aid? Again, this applies to rulers at all levels in society. Is the ruler of your house concerned about justice and the needs of the poor?

**3. Wife who works hard and is enterprising**

Having a wise mother was a great blessing to Lemuel. He did not choose his mother, but he did get to choose his wife. A poor choice could nullify all the wisdom imparted by his mother- just look at King Ahab. She knew how critical it was for her son to find a good wife, so she gave him advice. This advice comes in the form of an acrostic poem, as mentioned. While this literary feat may aid memorization, it does result in some disjointedness in the flow of thought. The first verse, verse 10, boldly declares that an excellent wife is worth far more than rubies. Solomon said, ‘he who finds a good wife finds a good thing’ (18:22 cf.12:4, 19:14).

This excellent wife is, of course, faithful to her husband, doing him good and not evil all the days of her life (31:12). Her husband implicitly trusts the wife given to him by the Lord (19:14). He trusts her to manage the household well. No man wants a wife who opposes and undermines all that he does. When a husband trusts his wife, and she trusts him, the family prospers and the whole society prospers (cf. Eccl 4:9-12). Who can calculate the cost to our society of broken marriages and dysfunctional homes?

Some are critical of this picture of an excellent wife because of its apparent focus on domestic duties. Such criticism stems from feminist rather than Biblical thinking. In fact, this poem praises the wife and mother for all she does to support and bless her family. To refer to a ‘working woman’ as one who works outside the home is a complete misnomer. Feminism sent mothers out of the home to work and now demands others be paid to come in and look after her household. Would it not be easier to pay the mother to look after her own household? Women should not be denied a career, but wisdom to manage this is greatly lacking in our society. Mothers working at home to support their family should not be disadvantaged; they should be praised for their hard work and enterprise.

The excellent wife willingly works with her hands bringing ‘food from afar’, and getting up early to prepare the day’s meals (31:13-15). The mention of maidservants does not limit this advice to a rich, aristocratic family (31:15). If a wife is not managing helpers of some kind she is managing children’s chores. The wife is responsible for preparing food; she is getting her hands dirty (31:13). ‘Food from afar’ and, ‘like merchant ships’, point to this woman being a bargain hunter. When prices are not fixed, the shopper has to bargain for a good price- that is after checking the quality of the product. When I went shopping in India I came home exhausted- and that was after buying just three things. It is amazing how much the household budget benefits from wise buying- and selling. This excellent wife appears to be in control of the household budget, at least with regard to food and clothes.

‘She considers a field and buys it’ (31:16). With her savings she plants a vineyard and makes even more. I think of my own mother who never worked outside the home but provided for the family and contributed to the farm business. She not only grew and collected produce but prepared and preserved food for meals all year round. She also knew what cows should be bought and sold, and checked all the accounts. The excellent wife is prepared for all seasons, even hard times. ‘Her lamp does not go out’ (31:18) means she has sufficient oil stored away, like the wise virgins of the parable.

The excellent wife is not only an accomplished cook; she can also sew and knit clothes, and that from scratch. She buys wool which she spins into yarn, and then weaves or knits garments for her family, and to sell (31:13, 19, and 22). She does the same with flax, making, linen undergarments. She can sell any excess because her work is of the finest quality - it is purple cloth (31:24). This woman takes pride in her domestic endeavours (31:25). She is a busy woman, not a sluggard (31:27), not one who sits around and gossips.

The hardworking wife is quietly teaching her children wisdom by example. She also teaches them verbally. She opens her mouth with wisdom and on her tongue is the law of kindnesses or the law of steadfast love (31:26). She does not go around complaining and shouting at everyone in her household. She is a wise and loving counsellor. When you hear the word ‘counsellor’ you think of a trained, professional person. But the best counselling was, and still is, done by wives and mothers trained in the wisdom of the Bible. I know because I see it!

The king was told to open his mouth for the poor and needy. His excellent wife will open her hand to the same disadvantaged neighbours. She extends her hand to the poor (31:20). The law of kindness which she teaches does not stop at her front gate. God loves a generous and cheerful giver (22:9, 2Cor 9:7). ‘When you give a feast’ said Jesus, ‘invite the poor, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed’ (Luke 14:13).

**4. Wife who is worthy of honour**

In choosing a wife the young king is warned about charm that is deceptive, and beauty that is passing (31:30). Beauty may only be skin deep- even the skin or hair can be ‘made-up’ as we say. Lemuel’s mother, like the apostle Peter, and maybe his mother before him, emphasises inner beauty, a gentle, quiet and submissive spirit (1Peter 3:4). Above all, a woman who fears the Lord is to be chosen and praised (31:31).

And so the Book of Proverbs ends as it began, teaching us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning or the essence of wisdom in every aspect of life. It began focussing on the young man gaining wisdom, and ends with praise for the young woman who has gained wisdom through the same fear of the Lord, and becomes a blessing to her husband, her children, and her community.

The excellent wife, as we saw, is trusted by her husband (31:11). He has complete confidence in her fidelity and her financial expertise, in her selfless hard work and generosity. He praises her privately and publically. He has to because her works praise her in the gates where he sits (31:31). Her husband sits in this place of honour and leadership even if not the king (31:23). He does so because of her unfailing support. An idle, gossiping wife would bring him shame, but not this excellent wife. Her children also ‘call her blessed’ (31:28). Her husband, her children, the poor and the whole society call her blessed, and above all the Lord calls her blessed.

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Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon

Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia

Sydney West congregation

P.O. Box 3007, Mt Druitt Village

NSW, Australia 2770

Ph.02 97240877

Email. dkmuldoon@hotmail.com