

The Beginning of Wisdom

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[0 : 00] Tonight's reading is from Proverbs chapter 1, which is found on page 634 in the Church Bibles. That is the whole of Proverbs chapter 1.

For giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young. Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance.

For understanding Proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Listen, my son, to your father's instruction, and do not forsake your mother's teaching. They are a garland to grace your heads, and a chain to adorn your neck.

My son, if sinful men entice you, do not give in to them. If they say, come along with us, let's lie in wait for innocent bloods, let's ambush some harmless soul, let's swallow them alive like the grave, and whole like those who go down to the pit.

[1 : 20] We will get all sorts of valuable things, and fill our houses with plunder. Cast lots with us, we will all share the loot. My son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths, for their feet rush into evil.

They are swift to shed blood. How useless to spread a net where every bird can see it. These men lie in wait for their own bloods, they ambush only themselves. Such are the paths of all who go after ill-gotten gain.

It takes away the life of those who get it. Out in the open, wisdom calls aloud. She raises her voice in the public square. On the top of the wall, she cries out.

At the city gate, she makes her speech. How long will you who are simple love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery, and fools hate knowledge?

Repent at my rebuke. Then I will pour out my thoughts to you. I will make known to you my teachings. But since you refuse to listen when I call, and no one pays attention when I stretch out my hands, since you disregard all my advice, and do not accept any rebuke, I in turn will laugh when disaster strikes you.

[2 : 36] I will mock when calamity overtakes you, when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind, when distress and trouble overwhelm you.

Then they will call to me, but I will not answer. They will look for me, but will not find me, since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord. Since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways, and be filled with the fruit of their schemes. For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them.

But whoever listens to me will live in safety, and be at ease without fear of harm.

Well, good evening everyone. It's great to be here with you. Let me add my welcome to Andrews. If we've not met, my name's Azariah.

I'm one of the ministry trainees here at St. Silas. We're beginning a new series in the book of Proverbs this evening, which will continue through our evening services over the summer, and it's going to be very helpful to me, and even more helpful for you, to keep your Bibles open to Proverbs chapter 1 as we go through.

[3 : 57] We live in an age where knowledge is endless. In 10 seconds, I can ask you a PhD, expert-level question. You can pull out your phone, and you can find the answer.

It's never been easier to know things. And you might expect that as people all over the world learned more and more, we'd be able to agree more about the best way to live as humans.

Humans have been raising families for thousands of years, but if you Google, when's the right time to have kids? How do I raise my kids well? Having access to all the facts from science and from sociology isn't going to give you some clear, perfect path to follow.

If we ask what the wisest choice for a career is, whether to go for work-life balance or a really high income, to go for a job you really like, or just to retire early and enjoy yourself then, you can find hordes of people supporting every single option.

And we have all of human history stretching out behind us, recorded and analysed, and yet we don't agree on the best way to run a country. Leaders around the world pursue completely different visions of what it looks like to lead their people well, and yet the only thing we do seem to agree on is that our leaders suck, and they're almost as bad as those ones over there.

[5 : 20] So, increased knowledge has been a great blessing and has improved the world in a lot of ways, but it's clearly not enough on its own. The book of Proverbs says that we need wisdom, and the whole book is written to help us get it.

Any short definition of wisdom is going to miss some things out, but the wisdom that Proverbs teaches includes things like understanding other people, understanding the world God has made, and understanding how to live well and flourish before him.

Wisdom is rooted in God. Proverbs chapter 8, which we'll look at in a few weeks, includes an incredible poem about the role of wisdom in creation as God sets the heavens in place and marks out the boundaries of the different realms.

Wisdom works because it goes with the grain of creation. The universe runs according to the character of the God who created it. If you want to live in a way that aligns yourself with the inbuilt order of the universe and to flourish in the way that God designed you to, Proverbs offers you the tool for the job.

Wisdom. At St. Silas, we like the Bible to set the agenda, so we most often preach through whole books. We start at the start, we finish at the end, and we go cover most of the middle.

[6 : 44] But for this series, we're not going to work our way through evenly, week by week. We're going to spend a lot of time in the first nine chapters and the last two. So here's a quick picture of the structure of Proverbs for your reference.

The first nine chapters, which we're beginning tonight, are a series of speeches exhorting the reader to pursue wisdom at all costs. Chapters 10 to 29 are a long series of sayings designed for contemplation and reflection to help the reader develop and practice wisdom for themselves.

And then the last two chapters give us the prologue for the book. So Proverbs is a little bit like a maths textbook. A maths textbook is mostly questions.

You might get a little bit at the start that explains how algebra works, but then you have three or four pages of problems that you need to solve yourself to learn how the algebra works and to apply it in different situations.

The book of Proverbs is a lot like this. The first nine chapters tell us to get wisdom, and then the chapters in the middle give us the problems to work through on our own to help us get it.

[7 : 54] So let me encourage you as we work through Proverbs this summer to dig into those middle chapters at your own pace, in your own time, as we study the call to wisdom and the fruits of wisdom in the first and last chapters of the book.

We're starting tonight at chapter one, beginning at the beginning, which seems like the wise place to begin. The first section in our passage today is verses one to seven, which give a purpose statement and an introduction to the entire book.

Verse one, the Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel. This book is largely the work of a king. Solomon is the author of a lot of the Proverbs we find in this book, and he's most likely the father that we'll see addressing his son over and over in chapters one to nine.

But the book of Proverbs wasn't written down by Solomon in a one-er. We see later in the book that we have a lot of other contributors mentioned, and we know that some Proverbs were being added well after Solomon's reign.

We see in chapter 25, verse one, these are more Proverbs of Solomon compiled by the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah. Hezekiah was Solomon's 10 times great grandson, and his reign began 200 years after Solomon's ended.

[9 : 13] What we see in verse one then is that the book of Proverbs began with Solomon as he recorded lessons in wisdom for his sons. Verses two and three give us an overview of what Proverbs wants us to gain, wisdom and instruction.

As we read on, so that we can understand insightful words, behave prudently and do what is right and just and fair. That last group of words, right and just and fair, are the domain of those who

govern.

Proverbs will help kings and all those in authority to rule with righteousness, justice and fairness. And then verses four and five tell us who Proverbs is for.

To paraphrase, Proverbs is for the not yet wise and the already wise. In particular, notice the word simple in verse four. The word simple is a little bit kind of like being naive.

The simple person in Proverbs hasn't yet learned how the world works, how things fit together, and is at the very beginning of the journey of wisdom. This word gets paired with the young and this pairing continues all over Proverbs.

[10:30] In a nutshell, if you're here tonight and you're somewhere south of 30-ish, Proverbs has a word for you. Simple. It could be worse.

You could be simple and preaching the first sermon in a series on Proverbs. For Solomon, the primary simple audience is his sons. He exhorts them with a father's love and a king's foresight to get wisdom so that the kingdom will be well cared for under their rule.

The big goal of Proverbs is to encourage and enable the simple to become wise and to enable the wise to grow in wisdom.

Verse six, as we read on, elaborates that both the young and the simple and the wise and the discerning need Proverbs because learning wisdom isn't straightforward. We're trying to understand the sayings and the riddles of the wise.

You never graduate from Proverbs. You simply increase in your ability to draw wisdom out of it with time and practice. And then verse seven gives us our first quintessential proverb in the book.

[11:46] The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction. This is the kind of saying, the kind of proverb that fills up chapters 10 to 29 almost without interruption.

Like all Proverbs, it's a short piece of Hebrew poetry. And like all good poetry, it's saying more than what is on the surface. We need to do some digging to draw out wisdom.

Hebrew poetry, especially the kind that we find in Proverbs, is built on parallelisms. There's two statements that sit next to each other and create meaning between them.

We have our first half. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Remember that in verse four, knowledge is what the young need. And then our second half, fools despise wisdom and instruction.

The very first two things Proverbs wants to teach us in verse two. How do these things fit together? What meaning can we draw out from this riddle of the wise?

[12:58] Well, if you want to go on a journey from simple to wise, you must fear the Lord. This isn't step one from then you get to knowledge, step two.

And by the time you get to wisdom, step 10, you've left it far away in the background. Rather, the fear of the Lord is the foundation. It's the path you walk on as you progress in wisdom.

So what is the fear of the Lord? Many of us will have heard this before, but it's worth restating, especially because Proverbs is going to use the fear of the Lord a lot. The idea begins in the Old Testament law.

Deuteronomy 10 verse 12 says, What does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul?

The fear of the Lord is not just about fear as we would understand it, but it also includes obedience, love and service that flows from our whole being.

[14:08] Proverbs 22 verse 4 adds, To summarise, the fear of the Lord is relating to God rightly as who he is and recognising who we are in relation to him and in relation to each other.

He is perfect, we are not. He is righteous, we are sinful. He is the creator, we are the creatures.

The wisdom that Proverbs offers is completely enmeshed with rightly relating to God as the creator and sustainer of all things.

It recognises who we are and who he is. We will come back to this at the end. On the other hand, in verse 7, we have fools who despise wisdom and instruction.

Fools are our other big category of people in Proverbs, alongside the simple and the wise. Fools, like the wise, begin as the simple, but reject wisdom as something worth having, along with all its fruits.

[15:21] So let's take these two halves and apply them to one another. If you desire wisdom, then you need knowledge. You must fear the Lord. So if you despise wisdom, you also despise God.

According to Proverbs, you cannot have one without the other. And this is the very first proverb at verse 7, which Solomon wants his sons, Israel's future kings, to grapple with and to learn from. Fear the Lord, don't be a fool. If you want to lead God's people wisely and well, with righteousness, justice and fairness, this is where you begin.

Fear the Lord. And this isn't just a necessary foundation for the king of God's people, it's a necessary foundation for all of us, as God's people. We need to relate rightly to God, and to one another, and to the world we inhabit.

We need wisdom. So, the first seven verses have given us the purpose of the book of Proverbs, and don't worry, it's also my longest section, that's now behind us, the end is coming.

[16:30] Let's now turn our attention to the next portion of this chapter, verses 8 to 19, the warning of Proverbs, Don't follow fools. This section is framed as parents exhorting their son not to ignore their instruction and teaching.

The first teachers of wisdom are wise parents. To a young prince, the foundation in wisdom given by his parents becomes a garland, a mark of victory for his head, and a chain, a symbol of office and status about his neck, in verse 9.

They set him up for a lifetime of wisdom. And the first teaching of these parents is a warning. My son, if sinful men entice you, do not give in to them.

If they say, come along with us, let's lie in wait for innocent blood, let's ambush some harmless soul, let's swallow them alive like the grave, and whole like those who go down to the pit, we will get all sorts of valuable things, and fill our houses with plunder, cast lots with us, we'll all share the loot. My son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths, for their feet rush into evil, and they are swift to shed blood.

[17:54] Notice this temptation flies in the face of the three attributes of wise kings that we saw in verse 3. The sinful men are asking the son to participate in unrighteousness, injustice, and unfairness.

And notice just how blatantly evil this scenario is. We'll lie in wait for innocent blood. We'll swallow them whole like the grave. Their feet rush into evil.

It's not especially nuanced. If anything, it seems a little bit obvious. My dad loved Proverbs. I grew up on a farm, so I got it quoted at me all the time, and it was usually either the agricultural ones or the laziness ones.

But even he, to me, never had to say, son, if someone invites you to go murdering, don't. Where's the wisdom here?

Let's read on to verses 17 to 19. How useless to spread a net where every bird can see it. These men lie in wait for their own blood. They only ambush themselves.

[19:00] Such are the paths of all who go after ill-gotten gain. It takes away the life of those who get it. Once again, in these verses, we have a short collection of Proverbs that speak into one another.

Once again, we need our poetry skills. We need to dig deeper than the surface. We've talked about parallelism, two halves working together. Another tool in the poetry toolkit that Proverbs uses is metaphor.

How useless to spread a net where every bird can see it. Even birds can see and avoid traps set for them if they're in plain view.

But these evil, foolish men do not see that their evil, foolish ways will catch them out in the end. They'll end up caught in the traps that they set for others.

To use a modern metaphor, the father could be saying, these evil men are so foolish that to call them bird-brained would be an insult to birds. And then in verse 19, we see the summary of the warning.

[20:04] Such are the paths of all who go after ill-gotten gain. It takes away the life of those who get it. If we read back over the warning now, some things come into sharper focus.

My son, if sinful men entice you, not with the temptation to commit violence, but with the temptation to, in verse 13, get all sorts of valuable things and fill our houses with plunder.

My son, do not go along with them. Don't even set foot in their paths. This is a common warning all throughout Proverbs applied to all kinds of danger.

Don't go along with them. In fact, don't even go there. Don't take the first step. Run in the opposite direction because all the paths of those who go after ill-gotten gain are like this.

They may seem clever, but they'll be caught in their own traps. They may seem enticing and attractive, but they lead to violence and death. We go from what seems on the surface like an obvious warning about not joining a murderous gang, which, to be clear, is bad, to a stark warning about the danger of temptation to get rich by any means necessary.

[21 : 21] Remember, our three categories of Proverbs people from earlier, those who go after ill-gotten gain are fools and the king's son is not to even stray towards their paths.

Hopefully, none of us have ever been seriously tempted to murder someone, but who here could say that they've never been tempted by the idea of a bit more money, even if it's not strictly fair and square?

As far as Proverbs is concerned, ill-gotten gain is as dangerous as joining a violent criminal gang and as foolish as trying to catch birds by holding a net straight up in the air and hoping that one flies into it, especially if you are going to be ruling a nation.

If the king is chasing after unjust gain, he can do massive damage, mistreating the people, worshipping foreign gods that promise riches, making alliances with evil tyrants, all walk in a path that ends in disaster.

Last week in our morning service, we heard about the evil king Ahab whose desire for ill-gotten gain ended in the death of righteous Naboth so that Ahab could take Naboth's fruitful vineyard for himself.

[22 : 36] This warning from Proverbs was ignored. We come now to the last portion of this chapter, the call of Proverbs to learn from wisdom. Chapters 1 to 9 of Proverbs are made up of speeches calling the royal son to choose wisdom.

Most of these speeches come from his father, but some, like the one we're about to look at, are written as though wisdom herself is personified and speaking directly to the reader.

Verse 20. Out in the open, wisdom calls aloud. She raises her voice in the public square. On top of the wall, she cries out. At the city gate, she makes her speech.

How long will you who are simple love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge? Repent at my rebuke.

Then I will pour out my thoughts to you. I will make known to you my teachings. First of all, we see that wisdom is not making herself hard to find.

[23 : 40] Be very suspicious of anyone offering secret wisdom from God. Wisdom that can only come through joining this particular church or this particular group or paying for this particular course or understanding this thing that the Bible says that everyone else missed for the last 2,000 years.

Wisdom is not secret or mysterious. She's out in the open, calling aloud in the public square. From the top of the wall and the city gate, she could not be easier to find.

And notice that her call is to everyone, not just to the simple, enjoying their blissful ignorance, but even to mockers and fools who've already rejected knowledge. And she calls all of them together to repent, to turn away from simpleness, mockery, and ignorance, and to learn her ways.

But easy to find isn't the same thing as easy to obtain. This will take work. She's not promising a secret wisdom hack to make life easy, but a lifelong opportunity to apply themselves to learning from her thoughts and teachings.

Wisdom is not hard to find, but it's not quick to develop. It takes time and effort. But they ignore her. Since you refuse to listen when I call and no one pays attention when I stretch out my hand, since you disregard all my advice and do not accept my rebuke, I, in turn, will laugh when disaster strikes you.

[25 : 11] I will mock when calamity overtakes you, when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind, when distress and trouble overwhelm you.

Wisdom knows where their path leads. When times are easy and life is going well, they rejected wisdom. But when times are difficult and life is falling apart, as they face the reality of the consequences of their foolishness, wisdom will spurn them as they spurned her, laughing at their disaster as they laughed at her warnings and calls to turn around.

And now, when everything has fallen apart for them, wisdom stops addressing them and addresses us. Verse 13. They will call to me, but I will not answer.

They will look for me, but they will not find me, since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord. Since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes.

For the waywardness of the simple will kill them. The complacency of fools will destroy them. But whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease without fear of harm.

[26 : 28] It's as though wisdom has shown us the consequences of rejecting her call and is now explaining why these consequences occur. Wisdom isn't something you can call on whenever you need without building it first.

If you come across someone who's had an accident, having access to a hospital's worth of equipment doesn't help you unless you've put in the training to understand what to use and how to apply it.

If I get hit by a car on my way home tonight, I'd rather a surgeon with a first aid kit than an accountant with an operating theatre. When difficulty or disaster comes, especially when it comes because of foolishness, you can't suddenly flip a switch, wise up, and set to work fixing things. At that point, it's too late and you have to live with the consequences without the tools to correct them. And notice the two types of fear in this last portion of the passage.

Now, we all know that life isn't that straightforward.

[27 : 43] Proverbs doesn't claim that things will always work out perfectly if we are wise or that fools will always suffer the consequences of their foolishness, but it does warn us of the dangers of folly and the benefits of wisdom.

It's like the pictures you see on cigarette packs that show the most extreme consequences of smoking. You might not experience those consequences, but you can't say that you haven't been warned.

And even if we don't fully see the fruits of that folly and wisdom here and now, we know that wisdom and folly will be met with their fruits in the end. So as we conclude, let me draw your attention back again to verse 7.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction. The book of Proverbs begins as a call to royal sons to grow into wise kings.

But if you've been here for our series in One Kings, you'll know full well that a wise, God-fearing king was the exception, not the rule. Even Israel's wisest king, Solomon, was led astray.

[28 : 53] Knowing how Solomon's life ended up, a lot of Proverbs reads like, do as I say, not as I do. God's people need a wise king, but no king was ever wise enough.

Until God's son, who shared completely in the perfect wisdom of his father, came to earth to announce a new kingdom. When those who thought they were the wisest of all in his day came seeking a miraculous sign, he said to them, the queen of the south will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it.

For she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom. And now something greater than Solomon is here. So how do we, on the beginning of our journey with Proverbs this summer, get wisdom?

How do we fear the Lord? We start by listening to the gospel of his son. If you're here tonight and you don't know God and you want the wisdom that Proverbs has to offer, the very first thing is to fear the Lord.

Learn who he is. Learn who we are in relation to him. Learn of his son who came to save humanity from the consequences of our own sin and foolishness and to be the wise king that we need.

[30 : 13] We'd love to have that chat with you before you go. You can chat to me, you can chat to the welcome team, you can ask anyone sitting around you. We'd love to have that conversation. And if you do know God, can I encourage you again to dive into Proverbs this summer?

Not necessarily reading big chunks at a time, but just taking one or two from those middle chapters and spending a day thinking over them, praying them, praying them for yourself, praying that God would give you wisdom.

wisdom. We live in a time and a culture where we have desperate need of wisdom. We have all the knowledge, but we need the wisdom to apply it so that we can live rightly as God's people in God's world.

Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you that wisdom is the thing that brings the universe together, that you are a wise God and that we see your wisdom reflected in the world around us.

We thank you that you promise to give wisdom to those who ask you. We pray that as we look at Proverbs this summer that you would be growing wisdom in us so that we can live rightly as your people, so that we can live rightly in the world around us.

[31 : 33] We pray that you would help us to look most of all to the wisdom of Jesus, our perfectly wise King. We pray all of this in his name.

Amen.