



Proverbs
WISDOM *for* LIVING

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How to use this guide

Review the context and big picture every week – The goal of a book study is not just to learn each individual lesson, but to build understanding of the Bible, how it fits together, and how to study it.

Try not to use this guide as a script. The purpose of this material isn't to give you exactly what to say. Rather it is to give you the content you need to structure and develop your own lessons. Teach as much as you feel is important for your class. Feel free to go off topic if your own study leads you to approach the passage in a slightly different direction.

Don't feel like you have to cover everything. There is a lot of material in each lesson. Some classes like to cover a lot of ground. Other classes like to camp on one point and drill deep. Start by teaching the Main Point, then teach the Main Bullet Points. Use the extra detail and discussion questions as you see fit. The goal is to generate discussion, specifically regarding life-application. So don't worry if you don't get all the way through a lesson.

Intro to Proverbs: What is Wisdom?

Proverbs 1:1-7

Finding Proverbs in the Bible:

Where Proverbs fits in the Bible: Proverbs is a book found in the Old Testament. It is classified as one of the Writings. Here is where to find it in the roadmap of the Bible:

- The Bible is broken into 2 groups: Old and New Testament
 - o The Old Testament is written in Hebrew and is about how God created a nation called Israel to be his chosen people. He chose them not because they were special, but because they weren't. They were as sinful, stubborn, and rebellious as any people group. He chose them so that He could teach them who He was, and so that they could be a lighthouse to the nations. He chose them, because it was part of His plan of redemption, a plan that culminates in the New Testament.
 - o The New Testament is written in Greek and is about two things: Jesus and the Church. The New Testament tell how a man named Jesus was born in Israel, how He taught and performed miracles, how He was crucified, how He was seen alive 3 days later, and how His followers saw that the resurrection of Jesus was the culmination of God's promise of Redemption.
 - o Proverbs is in the Old Testament

- Old Testament is broken down into 4 groups:
 - o Law, History, Writings, Prophets.
 - One of the biggest obstacles to reading and navigating the Old Testament is not understanding this 4-fold division. So take out your Bible, open to the Table of Contents and label the Old Testament books in these groups.
 - o Law – (Also Called the Torah, Pentateuch, and the 5 Books of Moses) Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.
 - o History – Joshua through Esther. These books tell the story of the formation, division, collapse, exile, and restoration of the nation of Israel. (see below OT history for more on this.)
 - o Writings – Job through Song of Songs. These books are a collection of wisdom literature (Proverbs), Worship Songs (Psalms), Philosophy (Job, Ecclesiastes), and Love Poetry (Song of Songs)
 - o Prophets – The rest of the OT contains the writings of the prophets. They are divided into two Groups, Major and Minor Prophets. This had nothing to do with the importance of each work. It has mainly to do with length. The Major Prophets wrote longer works.

- Major Prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel (We include Lamentations, which was written by Jeremiah, in the list of the Major Prophets, though in the Hebrew Bible it is listed in the writings with Proverbs, Psalms, etc)
- Minor Prophets – Hosea through Malachi

o Proverbs is in the Writings

Who Wrote Proverbs –

- When you look at Proverbs 1:1, it seems obvious that Solomon wrote the book of Proverbs. His authorship is mentioned again in Proverbs 10:1 and 25:1. But the question of authorship is trickier than it seems. Two other authors are mentioned. Proverbs 30:1 claims that “Agur the son of Jakeh” wrote what follows. Proverbs 31 is attributed to King Lemuel. So what is going on? The most likely answer is that most of the Proverbs originated with Solomon, but that they were gathered and written down at a later date by a later editor who also included the wise sayings of other great people. This seems to be suggested by Proverbs 25:1 which says, “These also are proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, transcribed.” It is, therefore, reasonable to believe a couple things about Proverbs:
 - o Solomon was the primary source of many of the wise saying
 - o Proverbs was “compiled” at some later date by an editor.
 - o Proverbs and sayings from sources other than Solomon were included
- This shouldn’t trouble us too much. Writing in the ancient world didn’t happen the way it happens now. In the New Testament Paul dictated all his letters. Someone else wrote them down. We still say Paul wrote them. The book of Jeremiah contains the words spoken by Jeremiah but they were not just written down by someone else, Baruch, but also at a much later date. In Jeremiah 36:1-3, God told Jeremiah to have Baruch write down all the oracles He had spoken “from the day I first spoke to you...even to this day.” So chapters 1-35 of Jeremiah were spoken by Jeremiah but written down by Baruch many years afterward.

What is a Proverb?

The book derives its name from the first word in Hebrew. A proverb in English is normally a very short pithy wise saying like “a stitch in time saves nine” or “fish and visitors stink after three days.” The word that is translated as “proverb” has a slightly larger definition in Hebrew. It can also mean “discourse” or “parable.” While many of the proverbs in this book are indeed very short, often two-line sayings, some are longer “monologues” delivered either by Wisdom herself, or by a father to his son.

What is Wisdom? (1:1-7)

This is a book offering to show the reader how to acquire wisdom. It starts where you might expect, by defining what exactly wisdom is. It defines wisdom by describing its three dimensions.

- Wisdom is Moral v3 – “Righteousness, Justice, Equity” If you asked someone what wisdom is, the first

answer you'd probably get would have something about morals and deciding about right and wrong. The pictures we have in our head about Solomon usually involve him being confronted with a complicated situation with no easy answers and somehow he decides on what the right thing to do. And it's true. This is a huge dimension of what wisdom is. Wisdom will help you be righteous, seek justice, and be fair with all people even in complicated situations. But that is not the whole story.

- **Wisdom is Practical v2, 4-6** – The Hebrew word for wisdom is best translated as “skill” It is used to describe the ability of the craftsmen who worked on the tabernacle in Exodus 31:6. This reminds us that the Proverbs are not abstract concepts. They are radically practical Wisdom isn't just something you know. It's something you do. It is learning to live skillfully. Verses 2-6 give some specifics about how one acquires this ability to live skillfully.
 - o **Comes through Instruction v2** – Because it is a skill, it is something you can learn, and you learn via instruction. That is why instruction is an often repeated word in these verses and in Proverbs. It is a specific kind of instruction: instruction in wise behavior. Becoming wise means learning to live well. You have to be taught. In order to be taught, you have to be teachable.
 - o **Based in Knowledge v4**– Wisdom includes knowledge, but it is not the exact same thing as knowledge. You need knowledge in order to be wise. But possessing knowledge isn't enough to make you wise. Knowledge is the start but it isn't the end.
 - o **Must Be Sought v5** If you were asked to describe a wise man, our description would probably involve the fruits of wisdom in the person's life. But here, the first attribute of a wise man is simply someone who wants wisdom. The wise man is someone who listens well and increases his knowledge. A wise man isn't just someone who knows a lot, but someone who wants to know. A wise man is constantly learning from everyone. He sees every opportunity as a chance to learn something new.
 - o **Requires Humility v5** In order to be taught, you have to be teachable. In order to seek wisdom, you have to admit that you don't have it. Wisdom requires humility. As long as you think you have it all figured out, you will never look beyond yourself for help.
 - o **Requires Work v6** Learning the art of skillful living will make your life easier in the long run, but it is not always easy. It requires work. There will be times that the instruction we receive is tough to figure out. The explanation for something may be hidden or confusing or not make immediate sense to us. That is why the words of the wise are sometimes described as “riddles.” They require work to understand and work to apply.

- **Wisdom is Theological v7** – Wisdom is moral. Wisdom is practical. But the most important dimension of wisdom is that it is Theological, which is just a fancy way of saying that it is God-Focused. Several times in the proverbs, including here in verse 7, we are reminded that “fear of the Lord” is where everything begins.
 - o **What does it mean to Fear God?** – When someone says that we should fear God, people often think it means that we should be afraid of God. But that is not what it means. We are told that God loves us (John 3:16), and that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). So the word fear must have a couple different but overlapping meanings. Fear can mean “to cower in terror at.” This definition is often synonymous with “to be afraid of.” But there is another definition of fear that means “to wonder and be amazed at.” This definition is synonymous with “to be awed by.” The difference is discerned in its effect on us. To be afraid of something makes you run away from it. To be awed by something makes you want to draw closer to it. Why is the word fear used? Most of the things that we are awe-struck and

amazed by are powerful. Like a fire or a waterfall. We desire to be close, but we have to be careful because it's bigger, stronger, more powerful than us. Fearing God is to be amazed by who God is and to desire to draw closer to Him.

- o Why is this the beginning of Wisdom? This is the most important dimension of wisdom because it is the source. Wisdom comes from being in right relationship with the one who made the world. The word for this is righteousness. Righteousness doesn't mean being right. It means being in right relationship. All the other words we use to describe what wisdom is supposed to produce in us, like virtue or ethics or morals, all convey the idea that wisdom is something we do for ourselves, by ourselves, and that we can be good on our own if we try hard enough. Biblical Wisdom doesn't work apart from relationship with God. You need righteousness; that is why Paul says in Romans 1:16-17 that he is "not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" and that the salvation the Gospel gives is simply the "righteousness of God." But righteousness doesn't mean trying to be good. That is why Jesus told his followers in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:20, "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." The Pharisees thought righteousness was achieved by one's own effort. Jesus is telling them that righteousness does bring life, and it comes through being connected with the one who is the source of life.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the divisions of the Bible? What are the divisions of the Old Testament? Where does Proverbs fit in all of that?
2. How would you answer if someone asked "Who wrote Proverbs?" How is writing and the concept of authorship different now than it was then?
3. Describe the Moral dimension to wisdom?
4. Describe the practical dimension to wisdom? What does it mean that wisdom is learning to live skillfully?
5. Describe the theological dimension to wisdom? What does it mean to fear God? Why is it the beginning of becoming wise?

Why Seek Wisdom

Proverbs 2:1-22

I once worked with a marriage counseling ministry in a church. They offered three kinds of counseling: pre-marital counseling, counseling for couples having marriage difficulties, and something they called “marriage maximizing.” When I asked what the third one was, I was told that it was for couples who weren’t having problems but simply wanted their marriage to be all it could be. I responded that those sessions are probably easier because the couples are already doing well and want to be doing better. The answer I received shocked me. They said these sessions were actually harder because they were the same as helping marriages in crisis, except these couples were unwilling to admit anything was wrong. They wanted to pretend everything was okay but at the same time try to get the help they needed.

This experience showed me that the first obstacle to getting help in life is being willing to admit it. You will never want wisdom until you realize you don’t have it. In chapter 1, we saw that a wise man is not someone who has obtained wisdom, but simply someone who wants to be wise. Chapter 2 moves on to offer encouragement to seek wisdom earnestly. It is a longer sermon-style proverb told from the perspective of a father addressing his son about how to obtain a good life. He is trying to show his son what seeking wisdom looks like and all the benefits that he will obtain from it.

How to Seek Wisdom v1-4

- Receiving It v1 “If you will receive my words...” – The first step in seeking wisdom is to be open to receiving it. The father is offering wisdom. The first step in gaining wisdom is seeking. The first step in seeking wisdom is being open to receiving it. Receiving wisdom is not a passive thing. It means valuing what someone is telling you, being attentive to it, and being humble enough to realize you need it.
- Storing It v1 “and treasure my commandments within you...” – One of the biggest reasons wisdom isn’t valued is because we think we don’t need it right now. Wisdom isn’t always immediately applicable to our current situation. There is a reason for this. It is better to learn how to handle a hard situation before we are actually in that hard situation. Like basic training which equips soldiers with how to handle circumstances before they encounter them for real in wartime, wisdom is often offered in times of peace, but if we will treasure it and store it away, we will have what we need when the time comes. To do this, requires patience and a focus that sees farther than our immediate concerns.
- Hunting for It v3-4 “cry for discernment/seek her like silver/search as for hidden treasure” – Seeking wisdom starts with the humility and being open to receiving it. Seeking wisdom means storing it to use at a later date. Seeking wisdom means earnestly, sincerely, single-mindedly searching for it. It means realizing its true worth and wanting it above all. If someone told you that someone close to you knew the secret location of a million dollars, what would you do? Most of us would drop everything, try to figure out who it was who knew, and how to get them to tell you how to find it. That is how we are supposed to seek wisdom, like a hidden treasure.

Why Seek Wisdom v5-22

Most people after reading that you have to seek like it's a hidden treasure feel a sense of let-down. Like the hokey ending to a bad movie where the hero uncovers a treasure chest, opens it up, and the only thing inside is a note that says, "peace on earth" or "love each other." We want real treasure not cheap platitudes that don't work. Truth be told, most of us don't ever seek wisdom because we don't think we will find anything but overly sentimental bumper stickers, or overly bitter rants about the way things used to be. Such thinking is nothing new. That is why this proverb proceeds to show the benefits we can expect from wisdom. This is what wisdom will do for you.

- Wisdom Will Draw You Closer to God v5-8 – The first reward for seeking wisdom is that it will draw you closer to God. As we saw last week, wisdom, at its core, is theological. Seeking wisdom leads to God because you will discover the fear of the Lord. The opposite is true as well. Seeking God leads to wisdom. Look at verse 6, "for the Lord gives wisdom." Some people just want God to tell them what to do. Some people want to decide what to do on their own. Both are extremes. God doesn't want immature, ignorant people who don't know how to live. He also doesn't want independent, isolated people who don't realize their need for Him. He desires to give us wisdom, not so that we can be free of Him, but so that we can be free, joyful, mature co-laborers with Him.
- Wisdom Will Help You Live Well v9-11 – Wisdom leads to God. Wisdom also leads to a good life. Sometimes we think the path wisdom will lead us on is like quitting a bad habit or going a diet. All we see is the delicious, but bad for us, food that we have to give up. But the picture painted in the next few verses is an internal transformation, changing us from the inside out.
 - o You will know the right thing to do v9 – The first thing wisdom will give you is insight into what the right path is. As you think about which path is right and why, you will see the value of wisdom and desire to choose rightly.
 - o You will enjoy doing the right thing v10 – As you think through wise choices, wisdom will become more than just a habit. It will become pleasing to you. You will see good produced by wise choices and will enjoy doing good. You will also see evil for what it is and no longer desire it.
 - o You will be protected from evil v11 – Wisdom protects you from evil both by showing you the right way to go, but also by making you the kind of person who delights in choosing rightly. It's a double defense that leads to living well. You will know the right thing to do and you will enjoy doing it.
- Wisdom Will Protect You from Bad Relationships v12-15 – Not only does wisdom positively and proactively help you live skillfully, but it will also protect you from the ways of people who don't care for wisdom. We sometimes excuse our association with bad people by saying we are trying to change them for the better. The proverbs are clear that if a person doesn't want wisdom it will lead them and those around down a terrible path. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:33, "Do not be deceived: Bad company corrupts good morals." This proverb goes on to describe the signs of such a person:
 - o Speaks perverse things v12 – Jesus told his disciples in Luke 6:45, "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart." The words that come out of a person's mouth are an indicator of what is inside of them. A person speaking perverse things is revealing what his heart is full of.

- o Delights in evil v13-14 – What we take pleasure in is a further indicator of the state of our soul. None of us is perfect. We all still stumble into sin. Sometimes we embrace sin willingly. But to call sin good, to no longer be ashamed of sin, or to long for sin more than righteousness is a dangerous place to be. In Philippians 3:19, Paul talks about people who “glory in their shame.” They are proud of what they should be ashamed of.
- o Devious in their ways v15 – The wicked are people whose paths are crooked. They get distracted and delayed by every sort of evil. They turn aside to investigate new opportunities for indulging their desires. Their path isn’t clear to themselves, and they try to hide it from others. Secrecy and deception are signs of an unwise person.
- Wisdom will Protect you from Ruining Good Relationships v16-19 – This proverb refers to two kinds of people that wisdom will help you avoid. The evil man (v12) and the evil woman (v15), who is also described as strange, foreign, or adulterous. Both of these characters represent types to be avoided. The call to avoid the adulterous woman occurs several times in the Proverbs. It is addressed to a married young man. It promises that wisdom will help you avoid her and in the process preserve your current marriage. Though primarily about marriage, it also applies to all relationships. It shows how wisdom will protect us from ruining our good relationships. The adulterous woman is the symbol for a relationship saboteur. It might also be the backstabbing friend, or the gossipy co-worker, someone who will destroy good relationships if we aren’t careful. This proverb gives three characteristics of such a person.
 - o Flatters v16– Flattery is hard to resist. The reason is that relationships are hard, especially between people living closely, whether they are married, friends, family, or coworkers. We see people at their most vulnerable and at their worst. We are always around them so we don’t censor ourselves. Often we dump our negative emotions on them. Then all of a sudden we meet someone new, who tells us everything we want to hear, who only focuses on what they like about us, and takes our side in every struggle we are in.
 - o Leaves v17 – Flattery offers a false promise that relationships should be easy and that those other relationships are bad for being hard. It’s a lie. Its goal is to cause us to forsake our commitments and leave when times get hard. That is what this woman in the proverb has done and what she will encourage you to do, by promising you ease and pleasure.
 - o Forgets v18 – All of this becomes possible by encouraging you to forget the promises you made. She “forgets the covenants of her God,” and she encourages you to do the same. Covenants and promises are there to help you keep going through the hard stuff, giving you reason to stay focused and continue when you feel like giving up or going away. Ruined relationships happen when people forget the promises they made to one another and leave when things get hard.

Only Two Possible Destinations v20-22

The Proverb ends with a description of the only two destinations in life. Wisdom and righteousness will lead to blessing and abundance. The wicked will be cut off and uprooted. The writer isn’t saying that if we do what God says then God will externally give us blessing, and if we don’t, He will smite it. He is saying that the paths we take lead to different destinations. Wisdom is a harder path of training and at times difficult, but it leads to life and blessing. Wickedness offers ease and pleasure but leads to death. As Jesus said in Matthew 7:13-14, “13

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. 14 For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” Don’t be deceived by the offer of an easy journey. First, it’s a lie. Second, it doesn’t matter if the journey is easy if it doesn’t lead you where you want to go.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why is wanting wisdom the most important starting point? What are the words used to describe our search for wisdom? Why do we often not search this way? How can we start?
2. How does wisdom draw us closer to God?
3. How does wisdom help you live well and enjoy living?
4. How does wisdom protect us from bad relationships? How do we sometimes excuse or justify remaining in our bad relationships?
5. How does wisdom protect us from ruining good relationships? The example was between a husband and wife. What other relationships might this apply to?

Trust in the Lord

Proverbs 3:1-12

When I was learning to drive, my parents bought me a manual transmission car, you know, the kind with a clutch and a stick-shift. They still exist, though they are getting increasingly hard to find. Getting a manual transmission car going out of first gear is incredibly difficult to get used to, you have to release the brake pedal, push in the clutch, put the car in gear, let out the clutch and give it some gas, all without stalling the car, or peeling out. The matter is complicated by the fact that if you are on any sort of hill, you have to do this incredibly quick or you will roll backwards into the car behind you. Well, I thought I had figured out the perfect solution to this difficulty. When I stopped at a traffic light, I would pull the emergency brake, which would keep me from rolling backwards. I just had to pop the clutch and let the brake out while gunning the engine. Let's just say the first time my father saw me do it, he was less than impressed. He told me I needed to stop doing it that way. I told him it worked for me and helped me deal with a difficulty I was having. He told me that it might work for a little while, but eventually I was going to destroy both the brake and the transmission.

That story of me and my manual transmission is a microcosm for our lives. We all think we have found a way to avoid living the way God or other people tell us. We console ourselves with the idea that it works, and helps us deal with our current situation. But like me and my transmission, the longer I lived that way, the more likely I was to break it.

Have you ever considered why we disobey? Not just why we disobey God, why we disobey anybody? Our parents, our bosses, other authorities, it could be anybody. What causes us to disobey? No one wakes up and says, "I think I'm going to do some sinning today." All of us have good reasons that we tell ourselves for all the bad stuff we do. If we were honest with ourselves, at the core of why we refuse to do what we are asked or told to do is lack of trust. We don't believe the person commanding us knows us, or cares about us; perhaps we feel forgotten by them, or perhaps we have forgotten who they are. Whatever reason, we decide we can't trust them, but instead need to rely on ourselves and take matters into our own hands.

The remedy to such thinking and behavior is to learn to trust again. That is where Proverbs 3 takes us. It is an invitation to trust God, to live the way He commands. The fancy-sounding Bible word for this kind of trust is faith, learning to rely on and depend on God instead of ourselves.

Trust God's Devotion v3-4

We disobey when we forget who God is, or we think God has forgotten us. This proverb encourages us to trust, but not blindly. Before it tells us "how" to trust God, it gives reasons "why" we should trust God and follow His commands.

We are invited to remember God's "kindness and truth," or your Bible might say "loyalty and faithfulness." These are more than just nice-sounding words for human relationship. These words in Hebrew are used to describe God's devotion to His people, His covenant love and faithfulness. In Exodus 34:6-7, God revealed Himself to Moses: "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for a thousand generations, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin."

God knows you, loves you, is committed to you, not because you are perfect, but because He made you and He loves what He made. This is the central truth that if we could internalize would make us eager to trust God. That is why the proverb tells us to bind this truth to our neck and write it on our heart.

Trust God's Plan v5-6

After telling us why we should trust God, the proverb shows us how. Trust God with your whole heart and don't trust your own understanding. Proverbs 14:12 says, "There is a way which seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death." We treat our lives like I was treating my transmission. It seems right, it feels right, but it leads to destruction. Trust starts when we realize we don't have all the answers. When we acknowledge our own lack of resources, we open ourselves up to God's power and wisdom. If you think you are wise in your own eyes, you will do things according to your own assessment of things, which will be deficient.

The promise is that if we will trust God and live according to His plan, He will "make our paths straight." Straight paths are an ancient symbol for the most direct route to travel to the destination. It is not the promise of an easy path every time, but it does promise that all the unnecessarily pitfalls of evil will be removed. I heard a guy say one time, "Life is hard, but it's harder if you're stupid." That is what straight paths mean. Life is hard enough without us making it harder on ourselves by doing things which seem easy at the time, but which create detours, dead-ends, and divots in our lives.

Trust God's Commands v7-8

Next the proverb develops the idea of how to trust God. Obey God's commands. Why do we disobey them. Often, we prefer the term "disregard." We think they don't apply to us, or that we are strong enough, or careful enough to not need these safeguards. Perhaps, we are still in the place where we doubt God's heart and think that God's commands are intended as burdens to crush our spirits, or wet blankets to spoil our fun.

The Proverbs continues with the theme about not trusting your own understanding by saying, "don't be wise in your own eyes." Don't think you are so clever that you have outgrown the need for guidance and direction.

The promise: it will be healing for your body and refreshment for your bones. My transmission was better when I learned to use it correctly. God's commands are the handbook for running the human machine. Living according to them will bring joy, peace, healing, and refreshment.

Trust God's Provision v9-10

One of the chief struggles people have is with money. No matter how much anybody has, we all still want a little more. Money is probably the thing that we trust in the most. We know we need it. We misunderstand it. We imagine that our problems would be solved if only we had more money.

This proverb encourages us to remember that God is the source of our provision. It tells us to give a portion of what we receive back to God in gratitude for His provision.

Giving is a difficult subject. It shows how true this proverb is. We think the money is ours. We think offerings and tithes are just ways religious people have created to bilk people out of their money. The truth is, we love money and we don't want to give it up. Giving to God is a way of demonstrating in a tangible way that we believe God is the source of all that is good in our life, to show gratitude, and to learn dependence on Him.

This proverb has a promise. If we will trust God with our money, He will bless us. It is so hard for us yet so important that this is one area where God says we can test Him. Malachi 3:10 says, “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,” says the Lord of hosts, “if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows.

This isn't some “prosperity gospel pyramid scheme” promise that God will give us everything we want. It's a promise that if we trust in God's provision, we can rely on the fact that He knows what we need, desires our good, and promises to fill our lives with blessing.

Trust God's Correction v11-12

The last area we are asked to trust God is when He disciplines us. Why bad things happen is a question that all people ask at one time or another. The Bible gives several answers. One of them is that sometimes hard times come upon us as a means of helping us see the errors of our ways and encouraging us to return to God. In Haggai 2:17-19, God tells his people, “I smote you and every work of your hands with blasting wind, mildew and hail; yet you did not come back to Me,” declares the Lord...Yet from this day on I will bless you.” This shows us that sometimes hard times are used by God to get our attention, but the goal is never to condemn or crush but only to encourage us to return to Him and to the path of life.

The correction of God is a sign of His love. He loves us so much that He will not let us remain in sin. He desires us to have the joy that comes from living the way He intended. Many people get caught up in the idea of God using hard times to correct us. Sometimes it's hard to think of God loving us and still allowing or even causing hard times to hit us. When those times occur, we have a hard time thinking they are caused by a loving God. Perhaps we feel like those times are proof that God no longer loves us. When faced with that possibility, many people either run away from God or try hard to prove themselves and earn God's favor. Neither path is positive or necessary. The right answer is to realize your identity and how God sees you. It is revealed in the last phrase of verse 12: “As the father corrects the son in whom he delights.” The son has acted in a way that requires correction, but the father still delights in the son. It is because the father delights in the son that he corrects him, so that He can experience the blessing that has been prepared for him.

Why does the sinful son still delight his father? Because the son belongs to his father. Even when God corrects us, He is delighting in us. We haven't lost His love. His correction is proof of His love. We don't have to earn it. It is ours because he is devoted to us, which brings us back to our first point: trust God's devotion.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What does it mean that God is devoted to us? Why is He devoted to us?
2. What does it mean to lean on our own understanding? Why do we do it? How can we learn to trust God instead of ourselves?
3. What does it mean that trusting God's commands will bring healing and refreshment?
4. How can we honor God from our wealth? Why does He ask us to do it? Why is it so hard? What should we expect in return?
5. What is the correction of God? Have you ever experienced it? What does it mean that God delights in us even when He is correcting us?

Guard Your Heart

Proverbs 4:20-27

I remember when I first learned the difference between a palace and a castle. We often use the terms in a similar way because they both can refer to the residence of royalty. But they are two different kinds of residences. A palace is a mansion, a fancy house, an example of extravagant architecture. A castle is a military fortification. It is designed to protect what it contains.

I also remember my first visit to a real castle. It had been constructed over several hundred years, with each generation adding layers of defense. As you approached, there was an earthen trench like a man-made valley at least fifteen feet deep. Then all the dirt that had been dug out from the trench had been mounded up behind it to create a steep hill as tall as the trench was deep. Beyond that was a thick stone wall. Inside the wall there was an additional inner wall before you finally arrived at the central citadel or keep. Why such precautions? Because what was housed in the citadel was extremely valuable, namely the nation's leader, and those who were being kept out were intent on doing him harm.

What is fascinating about studying such fortifications is learning how they were attacked and defeated. You would think that powerful siege engines and massive armies would be required to attack such well-guarded position. That is sometimes what happened. But more often than not, the favorite strategy was to convince someone on the inside to betray their own, unlock the door, and let the enemy sneak into the city undetected.

How does this connect to our study of the Proverbs? Short answer: You are the castle. And you are under attack. 1 Peter 5:8 says, "Be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." The question is what do you defend and how? Proverbs 4:23 says it clearly, "Guard your heart." This study will focus on what this means and how we should do it.

GUARD YOUR HEART V23

Your heart is more than your emotions. In the ancient world, your heart stood for your will and the place where your "self" resided. It was the central part of you, the non-physical part, the part that continues to live even after your body stops working. We use the word "soul" for now.

Your soul is the part of you that will live forever. You will one day get a new body, but you will be working with the same soul for eternity. The problem is that we often get our priorities between the body and the soul turned around. We tend to value our body more because that is the part that everyone sees. Our bodies are what we use to interact with the world and with each other. It is in our bodies where we experience a fair amount of pleasure and pain. Our soul, on the other hand, no one can see. In fact, some people go so far as to doubt that it exists. Most of us act like it is the least real part of us. How do I know? Because we allow harm to happen to our souls in order to prevent harm from happening to our bodies. That is a very crude but accurate definition of sin. In order to obtain some physical good, or avoid some physical pain, we lie, cheat, do other things that have their effect on a thing that we can't see.

Oscar Wilde wrote a novel called the Picture of Dorian Gray about a man who has a portrait painted of himself which takes on the signs of age and sin while the actual person remains youthful and pure. Our soul is like that portrait. It grows uglier from all the sin, but we console ourselves with the idea that no one will ever see it.

In Matthew 10:28, Jesus tells his disciples: “Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”

In short, Jesus is saying exactly what this proverb is telling us to do. Guard your heart. No one has access to your soul but God (who made it), you (whom He gave it to), and whomever you give access to it. Be careful whom you let it. Don't be the person who betrays the impregnable citadel to the enemy. Treasure it. Guard it. Defend it. Build walls around it. The rest of the proverb will show you how.

Watch your words v24

The consistent message of Scripture is that words reveal what is in your heart. In Matthew 12:34, Jesus says, “the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.” In James 3, we read about three pictures that show us the power of words. James calls our words a rudder (James 3:2-5), because they guide our lives. He calls them a fire (James 3:6-8), because they are dangerous when used incorrectly. He calls our words a well (James 3:9-12), that reveals what lies beneath the surface. The importance of this warning is both a call to take the test and ask ourselves what the words that come out of our mouths reveals about what is hidden in our soul. He is also suggesting, as does this proverb, that we can fill our soul with good things by training our tongue. Guarding our heart means watching the words that come out of our mouths, and using them as an indicator about what enemies we have already allowed within our walls.

Train Your Gaze v25

If our words reveal what is already in our soul, our eyes are a main way that it gets there. In the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 6:22-23, Jesus describes the importance of vision this way: 22 “The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. 23 But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” Your vision determines what you are filled with.

What you focus on will end up consuming you. So be careful what you focus on. If something catches your eye, and you become convinced that it will bring you pleasure to possess it, you will be consumed by it until you obtain it. If you focus on something that is causing you fear, you will become consumed by it until you are an anxious wreck. If you notice something in someone else that frustrates you, and choose to focus on it, you will become consumed with hatred.

That is why the consistent call in scripture is to fix your eyes on good things. Colossians 3:2 says, “Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.” Hebrews 12:2 tells us to run our race “fixing our eyes on Jesus.” Philippians 4:8 tells us, as a cure for anxiety, “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, to allow our minds to dwell on “whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence, and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.”

This isn't a call to deny bad things in life, or to overlook wrong done by an individual. But it is a call not to dwell

on it. The world is going to dangle a lot of things in front of us to entice us or scare us. Each of us gives the other plenty of ammunition to be frustrated with us. The antidote to all this is not to pretend it doesn't exist, but simply to train your gaze to focus on "heavenly things."

All of this was perhaps best summarized by the song we learned as children:

*Be careful little eyes what you see,
Be careful little eyes what you see,
For the Father up above is looking down with love,
So Be careful little eyes what you see*

Choose your path v26, 20-22

The last stage of guarding your heart is to choose your path carefully. But this is the last line of defense. Most people once they have filled their eyes and their heart with a desire for a specific thing, it is hard to keep them from choosing that path. That is why fixing your gaze and filling your soul with good things is so important. You will find it hard to resist the desire to choose the path that leads to life.

This proverb shows where the path starts. Look back at verses 20-22, which are the introduction to this section. Notice the frequent use of sensory words: incline your ear, don't let them depart from your sight; treasure them in your heart. The path to choosing the right path starts with wanting wisdom in the core of your being.

A life of wanting wisdom becomes a self-perpetuating cycle. Wanting wisdom will show you the importance of guarding your heart. Guarding your heart will lead you to watching your words, training your gaze, and choosing your path well. The best path to choose will be to want wisdom. And the cycle begins again.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.

1. What is our heart? What does it mean to guard it? Why do we sometimes betray our hearts to protect our bodies?
2. How does our speech reveal our heart? How can we use our speech to fill our heart?
3. How does our gaze determine the content of our soul? How is our gaze affected by things we fanaticize about, things that we fear, or things that frustrate us?
4. Do you have experience of becoming consumed with something you focused on for too long? How can we use it for good? What should we focus on?
5. Why is choosing your path carefully a last line of defense? How has the decision usually already been made?

Wisdom and Wandering

Proverbs 5:1-23

In 1757, at the age of just 22, recent convert and later to become Baptist Preacher, Robert Robinson wrote a famous hymn, “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” As the title suggests, the hymn praises God for being the source of all that is good in our lives. The hymn acknowledges both the goodness of God and our own tendency towards rebellion and sin. In the third verse, it contains a powerful confession, “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.”

If we are honest with ourselves, we will acknowledge the truth in this line. We are forgetful of the goodness of God and quickly become distracted by the ways in which our sinful world offers more attractive solutions to our current problems. Our susceptibility to wandering off and getting into trouble is the chief reason why the Bible constantly refers to us as sheep. Isaiah 53:6 says, “All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.” It is also why the Bible constantly reminds us how temptation works and how we are sucked in. James 1:12-18 talks about how our sinful selves are carried away by our own desires. 1 John 2:15-17 shows us how the world is full of things which offer false fulfillment.

The book of Proverbs is full of wisdom about how to deal with our tendency to wander from the path of God. Today we are going to study Proverbs 5, which contains the instruction of a father to his son about avoiding adultery and pursuing faithfulness in marriage. Though the specific advice is told from a male perspective and is focused on sexual ethics, the principals that it contains can be applied equally to both sexes as well as to a variety of other types of temptations.

Our world is full of the scars of broken human sexuality, so we shouldn't avoid talking about Christian sexual ethics. This proverb contains important counsel for how to discover God's ideal for sex and for families. But we also shouldn't restrict the advice given here to just sexual temptation within marriage. Young or old, married or not, male or female, we all are tempted to wander from God's promises and to pursue things that promise more immediate fulfillment. This proverb contains important guidance in general about how to live in such a way as to avoid temptation, guard against sin's negative repercussions, and enjoy the benefits of a God-honoring life.

Don't Listen to Sin, vv. 3-6

“A spoon full of sugar helps the medicine go down.” So goes a song from a popular musical. Back when most medicine was liquid and nasty to taste, doctors figured out that putting honey on the rim of the cup could help you drink down bitter tasting medicine. The problem is that bad people figured this out too. People would drink any poison as long as there was honey on the rim of the cup.

The father in this proverb tells his son to be aware of the words of the adulteress. Her lips “drip honey.” Her speech is “smoother than oil.” This is a personification of temptation. Temptation doesn't offer us something we already have. It offers us something we lack, or it offers us a shortcut to somewhere we want to go. Temptation exploits us by promising us something we think we need.

The problem isn't what sin promises, but that it can't deliver. It is lying to you. The father unmasks sin for the son and shows him what the tempter will do to you.

- Leaves a Bitter Taste (v.4: "bitter as wormwood") – Though sin initially may taste sweet, it will leave a bitter taste in the mouth. It won't satisfy. It will leave you feeling worse than before.
- Leaves You Wounded (v.4: "sharp as a two-edged sword") – Sin promises healing but ends up wounding us deeper.
- Leads to Death (v.5: "her feet go down to death") – Sin offers life but leads to destruction.
- Leaves You Unthoughtful (v.6: "does not ponder the path of life") – Sin offers immediate pleasure in the present and makes us unthoughtful of the future.
- Leaves You Unsure (v.6: "her ways are unstable") – The path of sin does not just lead to a terrible destination; the path sin leads you on is terrible as well.
- Leaves You Unaware (v.6: "she does not know it") – Finally, sin will leave you unaware that this is happening. It numbs you to the negative effects it is having until it is too late, until you are so far gone that you feel lost and don't know your way back.

Don't Linger Near Sin, vv. 7-14

Temptation snares us by luring us into its orbit. We think we are strong enough. We think we know our limits. We end up playing a game with sin. We try to figure out how close we can get to sin without getting in trouble. A wise man once said, "Temptation usually enters into a house through a door intentionally left open." The father follows up his encouragement not to listen to temptation by advising further caution. "Do not go near the door of her house." Stop playing games with sin. Stop lingering in the proximity of sin. Stop seeing how close you can get to the edge without falling off. The rest of this section is focused on what will happen when you get sucked into sin:

- Sin Will Rob You (vv.9-10) – In John 10:10, Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Sin is a thief. It ends up taking away the good things that God has given you. It promises riches and ends up leaving you with nothing.
- Sin Will Ruin You (v.11) – Not only will sin rob you; it will ruin you. It promises you life and ends up ruining your life.
- Sin Will Fill You With Regret (vv.12-14) – Sin will take your money. Sin will ruin your health. Sin will wreck your spirit. Regret fills the person who has been lured into sin.

Trust God, vv.15-23

In response to the father's encouragement to avoid listening to and lingering near sin, he also gives positive advice about what to do instead.

- Trust God's Plan (v.15-17) – The advice given here is specifically directed towards the subjects of adultery and marital faithfulness. But it has broader application as well. When your thoughts and

feelings become convinced that some sinful behavior will satisfy, the recipe is to stop believing them and start believing God. Trust God's plan as the one that will ultimately bring life. The advice given by the father is very matter-of-fact: be where you are supposed to be, and do what you are supposed to do. God designed the world and knows how it was meant to be enjoyed. When all else fails, trust God's plan. This message runs through all the proverbs. It is most famously presented in Proverbs 3:5: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding." Proverbs 16:25 says, "There's a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death."

- Trust God's Purpose (vv.18-20) – Sometimes trusting God's plan can seem like blind obedience. Sometimes that's okay. In the midst of a flood of temptation, just doing what you should and not what you feel like doing will come in handy. But God does more than just tell us to obey, He offers us reasons why His way is best. Verses 18-20 show the joy that is to be found in marital faithfulness. Look at the words that fill this passage: joy, blessed, satisfy, exhilarated. The purpose behind God's plan is that He desires us to find joy: real, lasting joy. Sin promises an easy path to joy and ends up leading us to ruin and regret. God's commands show us the path of obedience, which may seem hard or counterintuitive, but ultimately ends up leading to true, lasting joy.
- Trust God's Providence (vv.21-23) – God does more than just offer us a roadmap to joy. He goes with us. Verse 21 says, "the ways of man are before the eyes of the Lord and He watches all his paths." This isn't supposed to scare us into thinking God is some cosmic Santa Claus who keeps tabs on whether or not you are behaving. He is with you. He is keeping track of you. You aren't alone or on your own. He sees you. He is looking out for you.

Conclusion

We are sheep. Sheep wander off and get into trouble. This proverb reminds us that we have a good shepherd who shows us how to keep from wandering off and why we should stay on the path He has for us. Learning not to listen to or linger in sin will go a long way towards keeping us from being lured off course. Trusting that He loves us, leads us, and goes with us will give us confidence to stick close to Him.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does it mean to listen to sin? How does sin whisper to us?
2. How do we linger close to sin? How can we learn not to do this?
3. What does it mean to trust God's plan?
4. What does it mean to trust God's purpose?
5. What does it mean to trust God's providence?

What God Hates

Proverbs 6:12-23

“Hate” is a strong word. We sometimes use it flippantly to express our displeasure in things like food and minor inconveniences. Sometimes to teach children the power of words, we tell them not to use the word hate, or that we shouldn’t hate things. Such tactics are rightly motivated but perhaps don’t tell the whole story. There are bad things in the world, things we shouldn’t tolerate, approve of, or moderate our response to.

A better approach is one I heard a mother tell her child when the child said something extreme like “I hate carrots.” She responded, “You are only allowed to hate things that God hates. God doesn’t hate carrots so you can’t either. But you are allowed to not like them.”

Such an approach reminds us that there are things that are the appropriate focus of our hatred and encourages us to ask the questions whether God hates this thing, and if he doesn’t, neither should I.

Some people bristle at the notion of God hating things. We are reminded that God is a God of love and that love is not compatible with hate. Such thinking is too simplistic. God does hate things. He pours out His wrath on them. He does so out of His love. Romans 1:18 says “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” God pours out His wrath on unrighteousness. It might seem like splitting hairs, but the passage says “on the unrighteousness of men” not “on unrighteous men.” God hates sin. He hates sin because of His love for us. He hates sin because of its effects on us.

What God hates is the subject of our study today. We are going to look closely at it so we can see the things God hates, see their effects on us, and be reminded that if God hates them, we should too. Learning to see sin for what it is and for what it does to us will go a long way in helping us avoid it.

Why God Hates, vv.12-15

The passage starts not by discussing God’s hatred but by showing us a picture of the effects of sin on a life. Verse 12 uses two words to describe a person full of the things God hates: worthless and wicked. God doesn’t make the man these things; sin does. The next few verses list the progression that there is no area of a person’s life free from sin’s corruption.

- Sin Corrupts Your Actions (vv.12-13) – Sin corrupts a person’s actions. First mentioned is a “perverse mouth” from which one can expect lies, rumors, slander, and gossip. The description of “winking” and “pointing” is probably a reference to signaling and conspiring with others and arranging to engage in secretive behavior which would not be approved of by society at large.
- Sin Corrupts Your Soul (v.14) – “with perversity in his heart” Sin doesn’t just effect our actions; it corrupts our soul. It gets inside us and changes how we approach life. Sin creates in us a perverse heart which in turn causes us to “continually devise evil.”

- Sin Corrupts Your Relationships (v.14) – “who spreads strife” Sometimes we act like our private choices are our personal concern and nobody else’s business. But the truth is that sin corrupts our relationships as well. Sinful souls produce sinful actions. Sinful actions leave damaged relationships in their wake.
- Sin Corrupts Your Life (v.15) – Despite the illusion that evil people escape the consequence of their actions, the truth is that sin corrupts our lives. It will ruin us. As Romans 6:23 says, “the wages of sin is death.” Death is what sin earns, what sin creates. It might give the illusion of bringing joy and life, but the only thing sin does is destroy. That is why God hates it so much. The end result is always and only death.

What God Hates, vv.16-19

The description of the harmful effects of sin on a person’s life proceeds into a list of things God hates. Sometimes we stop short and leave our contemplation about sin’s harmful effects by saying, “God hates sin,” then moving on. But this passage moves on to list specific things that God hates. The literal translation of the last phrase of verse 16 is “seven things that are an abomination to His soul.” It might sound like an odd phrase, but it means that these things are not surface issues or moderately disliked things. His hatred of these things emanates from the deepest, most central part of His being. “Abomination” is a word that means something that deviates from His plan and order of things. It doesn’t fit or belong. There is no place for it in the world He made. Such words should cause us to take the following list seriously.

- Arrogant Eyes – This isn’t about how you look to people. It’s about how you look at people. Arrogance, pride, haughtiness has no place in God’s creation. It will cause you to look down on other people as less important or less valuable than yourself. It will make you think you deserve special treatment and consideration. In turn, it will make you justify exalting yourself and mistreating others. This sin produces all the other ones. It is the reason why pride was considered by many Christian thinkers as the chief deadly sin. But it is also the hardest for us to spot in ourselves. So to make sure we don’t miss it, the list goes on to show what might be called “other sins produced by pride.”
- Lying Tongue – God loves the truth. He is the Truth. We often find reasons not to tell people the truth. Sometimes we do it to spare other people’s feelings or to avoid awkward encounters. But the truth is, often we tell lies to manipulate situations so that we appear how we want to appear and situations turn out the way we want.
- Hands that Shed Innocent Blood – God is the protector of the weak and defenseless. He is talking about killing, but the emphasis is on the innocence of the victim. It’s a reminder that we can’t treat people how it is convenient for us. We can’t use them for our pleasure or ruin their lives to make ours easier. We have to treat them like who they are, created in the image of God.
- Heart that Plans Wickedness – What we meditate on determines our reality. What we focus our hearts and minds on determines the kinds of things we pursue. Bad thinking will cause bad acting. We might not carry out the full extent of our sinful imaginings, but when we think about harming or using somebody, we are bending our heart in that direction.
- Feet that Run to Evil – The direction our heart is pointed determines the direction our feet run. A heart longing for something will jump at the opportunity to engage in it. Thinking about sin makes us willing to engage in it.

- False Witness – Lying has already been mentioned. It is repeated to reinforce the idea that God cares about the truth. But also it mentions a specific kind of lying. Bearing false witness means telling lies in such a way that another person is harmed. We should speak the truth even when we don't benefit from it. We shouldn't withhold the truth if it could benefit another person. We shouldn't distort the truth even if it might cast us in a bad light or harm our position in some way.
- Spreading Strife – Conflict is sometimes necessary. But the goal isn't conflict. The goal is peace and restoration. Sin causes strife: unnecessary, useless, pointless, selfish conflict. There are some people who are fighting with everyone all the time. Strife and disharmony follow them. Normally it is as a result of our arrogance. We don't get what we want so we complain. We should strive for harmony and peace more than for getting what we want.

Conclusion

Remember what the mother said to her child, "You can only hate what God hates." God doesn't hate the world. He made the world and loves it. God doesn't hate people. We are created in His image. But God does hate the ways sin manifests itself in our world. He hates them because they corrupt our lives and bring death to ourselves and our relationships. He doesn't just dislike them. He hates them at the very core of his being. They have no place in the world He has made. He wants them gone so that we can find life, joy, peace, and fulfillment. The sooner we learn to see things the way God does, the sooner we will start finding the life He has for us.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do we misuse the word "hate?" What does God hate? Why?
2. Why is sin not a personal or private matter? How do our private decisions lead to us to treat others differently?
3. How is pride the chief sin? How does it give rise to the other sins?
4. How do we sometimes "modify" the truth to benefit ourselves?
5. What is the difference between healthy conflict and spreading strife? How do we know when to speak up and when to keep our mouths shut?

Living in God's Sovereignty

Proverbs 16:1-9

America is a land of self-starters. We are pioneers by nature. Our history is full of people who set out on their own and carved out a new life in a difficult environment. Sometimes this fierce independence and work ethic can cause us to give advice to people that sounds like motivational posters. Dream big, work hard, etc. We tell ourselves and others that there is nothing we can't achieve if we believe in the power of our dreams and are willing to work for it. Probably the most extreme form of this came from a phrase I heard a motivational speaker tell a large audience: "If your mind can conceive it and your heart can believe it, then you can achieve it."

The problem with these so-called motivational speeches is that they can have the opposite effect. Such statements make it sound like the success or failure of our plans is localized only in the extent to which we are willing to work hard. When we fail to realize our dreams, we can fall back into self-doubt, self-criticism, and despair. We tell ourselves that we have only ourselves to blame. Additionally, when we do succeed our egos become bloated, and we become over-confident and arrogant. We did it ourselves. Both positions are extreme and lead to us seeing ourselves wrongly. The antidote to such thinking is learning to live under God's sovereignty.

The sovereignty of God can be a controversial topic of discussion in some circles. Maybe because some people have a hard time saying it. (It's pronounced: SOV-rin-tee) Maybe because some people think it means God is in control and therefore can do what He wants. Though technically true, such a statement focuses on the power of God without discussion of His character. God's sovereignty can be a bitter pill to swallow unless you also realize that God is good. Maybe it's because we think sovereignty removes from humans the power or responsibility to choose well. If God is in control, such thinking says, then my choices don't matter or perhaps are even an illusion.

All of these are misunderstandings. An easy way to remember what the word means is to see the word at its center: "reign." God rules over all the things He has made like a king. Perhaps we have a hard time with this idea because America was created by rebelling against a king. We forget that it's possible for a king to be good and to rule a country in a way that leads all the inhabitants to blessedness.

To understand more about this controversial but central attribute of God, we are going to look at Proverbs 16:1-9, which speaks to this issue. These verses show us both what God's sovereignty means and how we can learn to live well in it.

What God's Sovereignty Means

- God Guides Us (vv.1-3, 9) – Some people wrongly interpret God's sovereignty to mean that our choices are meaningless. Some critics of sovereignty think that it wrongly means we don't have the power to decide anything, that we are just robots programmed by God, or puppets whose strings are pulled by God. The idea that our choices are pre-determined and out of our control is called fatalism. Sovereignty really means that God guides us as we choose.

- o Verse 1 might seem confusing. It is most literally translated, "The plans of the heart belong

to man, but from the Lord comes a responding tongue.” The idea is that God has something to say about our plans.

o Verse 9 repeats this idea: “The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.” These verses remind us that God gives us the privilege and responsibility to make the best choices we can with the information we have available to us. They also remind us that after we have done the best we can, we can trust God to guide us down the path.

- God Protects Us (vv.2, 4, 5, 7) – Sovereignty is sometimes misinterpreted as something which keeps you from doing what you want. We see it as a competition between our wills and God’s. But when we consider the character of God, it is better understood as an aspect of God’s protection over us.

o Verse 2 reminds us that “God weights the motives.” He knows our hearts and why we are doing things. He knows when we choose good things for bad motives. He also knows when we fail at attempting hard things for good motives. Because He knows our hearts, He can direct us down paths that will benefit and bless us.

o Verse 4 is another verse that is a little hard to understand. It sounds like God created evil people for evil purposes. What it actually means is something closer to “God is in control and is able to use even people’s wicked acts for good.” This truth is repeated throughout Scripture. In Genesis 50:20, Joseph tells his brothers who sold him into slavery, “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” Romans 8:28 reminds us “that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” This doesn’t mean that evil acts aren’t evil, or that we won’t ever experience hardship. It encourages us to believe that God’s plan isn’t defeated by the evil in the world.

o Verses 5 and 7 show us that God defends those people who seek Him. Those who oppose God are opposed by Him. For those who seek Him, God gives favor and peace even with those who are His enemies.

- God Restores Us (vv.5-6) – God doesn’t control us. He guides us. God’s sovereignty doesn’t excuse us from the consequences of our actions. When we rebel, we meet His rebuke. But it also doesn’t leave us hopeless. God’s sovereignty means that He restores us. Verse 5 is both a statement that God will protect us from arrogant people and an encouragement to avoid being arrogant ourselves. Immediately following that warning against arrogance, verse 6 tells us “by lovingkindness and truth, iniquity is atoned for.” This may sound like it is suggesting we be loving and honest as a way of making up for our sins. But the words “lovingkindness and truth” are better translated “loyalty and faithfulness.” As we saw in Proverbs 3:4, they don’t refer to human actions, though we should try to emulate them. These are the words that describe God’s devotion to His people, His covenant love and faithfulness. In Exodus 34:6-7, God revealed Himself to Moses: “The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for a thousand generations, who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin.” God restores us not because we are good or promise to try harder; He restores us because He loves us and is committed to us.

What Living in God's Sovereignty Means

When you survey these verses, we realize the futility of trying to live outside God's Sovereignty. Trying to live outside of God's sovereignty leads to arrogance and heartache. As Jesus told Paul on the Damascus Road, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads." (Acts 26:14) If we look again at these verses in Proverbs, we will see not just what God's sovereignty means, but what it means for us to learn to live well under God's sovereignty.

- Commit Your Work (v.3) – We aren't called to surrender our dreams or desires. God created us with unique passions. He simply calls us to submit them to Him, to trust Him with their timing and ultimate outcome. We aren't just looking for God to rubber stamp our plans and approve them. Rather, it is about learning to trust that God has a big plan that is for His Glory and the good of His entire creation. Even when God tells us no or tells us to wait, we can trust that He has our ultimate good in mind. We can't rush God or force God to do what we want. Revelation 3:7 describes God as the one "who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens." Proverbs 19:21 says, "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails." Proverbs 21:30 says, "There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD."
- Fear the Lord (v.6) – Hopefully by now we understand that the constant reminder in proverbs to "fear the lord" isn't a call to be afraid of God and live in terror of what He is able to do if we get on His bad side. Rather it is a call to be focused on and amazed by what He is able to accomplish. In the midst of our planning and dreaming, we can get consumed by ourselves, or the obstacles, or other people. This is a reminder for us to center our attention on God, learning more about who He is, seeing the great things He has done, and being amazed at how His good plan unfolds in our midst.
- Be Content (v.8) – This may be the hardest part. Learning to be content. So many times our plans are about trying to acquire more of something. These are the bad motives mentioned in verse 2. Verse 8 reminds us to seek God and trust that He will provide.
 - o Being content means learning to analyze our motives - It may require us to ask ourselves why we want something. Perhaps we are falling prey to the world's temptations. 1 John 2:16 describes the three main ways the world entices us. "the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life." We crave pleasure (lust of the flesh), possessions (lust of the eyes), and position (boastful pride of life).
 - o Being content means learning to trust God – Contentment doesn't mean resignation. Contentment means believing that you have what is good for you to have. Contentment doesn't mean you aren't allowed to dream or that wealth is evil. Contentment means that nothing is worth obtaining if you have to act unjustly to achieve it.

Conclusion

In the end, the one thing we don't have a choice over is whether we live under God's sovereignty or not. Learning to live under it more precisely means learning to live in going with the flow of God's will instead of against it. The more we understand what God's sovereignty is, Who it is that is ruling over us, and how, the better equipped we will be to live in harmony and peace with Him.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does the word “sovereignty” mean? What are some reasons people respond negatively to the word? What are some bad definitions of the word?
2. How does God’s sovereignty guide us?
3. How does God’s sovereignty protect us?
4. How does God’s sovereignty restore us?
5. What does it mean to learn to live under God’s sovereignty?

Biblical Friendship

Proverbs 17:17

Friends is one of those words that has lost much of its meaning. We have thousands of “friends” on social media, but many of them are people we hardly see and barely know. Even before Facebook, the term “friend” had come to mean just about anybody we are acquainted with. But the Bible uses the term “friend” to mean something deeper, something akin to what we might call “best friends.” Such friendships are both necessary and rare. It can be easy to blame technology for the ways in which our lives have become distanced and isolated from each other. But the truth is that developing friendship has always been challenging. It requires being intentional and wise. That is why the Book of Proverbs is full of wisdom about what friendship is for and how to pursue meaningful ones.

Today will be a little bit of a Bible drill. The verses we are looking at are scattered through the book, but when you piece them together, they form a powerful picture of Biblical friendship.

A Friend Changes You (Proverbs 22:24-25 and 13:20)

It is tempting to start a study of friendship with all the flowery and beautiful proverbs about friends (don't worry, we will look at those), but the truth is proverbs makes a point to tell us to be careful who we let into our lives. Friendship changes a person. Be careful about the people you allow into the deepest part of your life.

- Proverbs 22:24-25 says, “Do not associate with a man given to anger; Or go with a hot-tempered man, Or you will learn his ways. And find a snare for yourself.” This isn't a call to disassociate with certain people. It is a reminder that the people we let into our lives transform us. We desire for good to transform bad, but the truth is that more often than not it goes the other way. 1 Corinthians 15:33 says it this way, “Do not be deceived: Bad company corrupts good morals.”
- Proverbs 13:20 says, “He who walks with wise men will be wise, But the companion of fools will suffer harm.” We are called to love everyone. But the people we allow deep into our lives should be people who will transform us for the better. We become like those with whom we spend the most time, so get close to people who you want to be like.

A Friend Cares

- Proverbs 18:24 says, “A man of too many friends comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” Many of the friendly acquaintances we develop are relationships of convenience, people we share proximity with. You work or live near them, or share some hobby that puts you routinely together. But the moment you move, or a schedule changes and you are no longer routinely put in contact with them, the friendship fizzles. Such acquaintances are enjoyable and important. They can even be the soil from which true friendship emerges, but true friendship is revealed in the midst of hardship. True friends intentionally choose to stay close when it would be more convenient to go with the way the world is pulling you.

- Proverbs 17:17 says, “A friend loves at all times, a brother is born for adversity.” A sure sign of a true friend is someone who will stick with you in hard times. Life is messy. Most of us have enough mess in our own lives without adding someone else’s to it. A true friend cares enough to put up with the inconveniences of life and the adversity we all experience. Sometimes it is the very adversity we encounter that can transform an acquaintance into a true friend. Going with a person through hardship has the capacity to transform a relationship.

A Friend is Conscientious (Proverbs 25:17 and 27:14)

One common attribute that many people associate with true friendship is familiarity. We imagine friends as people who know the in’s and out’s of other people’s lives and are comfortable being themselves around each other. Sincerity and honesty are definitely keys to friendship. Feeling like you need to pretend around someone is never a recipe for growing a friendship. On the other hand, there is a form of familiarity that is actually a kind of disrespect. True friends understand what the other person needs to be healthy and gives them room when they need it.

- Proverbs 25:17 says, “Let your foot rarely be in your neighbor’s house, or he will become weary of you and hate you.” This is about having healthy boundaries. We sometimes use words like “extrovert” and “introvert” to discuss the ways which we all have differing degrees of need when it comes to social interaction. This proverb reminds us that a friend focuses on giving what the other person needs rather than seeking what they themselves want.
- Proverb 27:14 says, “He who blesses his friend with a loud voice early in the morning, it will be reckoned a curse to him.” I love my kids. But I don’t love my kids when they wake me up early. This is another proverb about the respect friends give each other. Even a blessing can become a curse when it is offered at the wrong time. This proverb mentions waking a person early, but it could also mean interrupting his work or other ways in which we intrude on people. It might be a good thing we are intruding with, but ultimately it will be seen as an intrusion and not a blessing. A true friend knows when he can bother a friend and when he needs to give him some space.

A Friend Counsels, Corrects, and Confronts

A friend cares more than just having a good time with you. They care about you. One aspect of caring about someone is wanting them to be the best version of themselves, or more accurately, the fullest expression of whom God created them to be. Because of that a friend counsels, and even corrects and confronts. Such experiences can be painful. Being true friends means being willing to do it when necessary and being willing to receive it when necessary. These are some proverbs that can help us do that.

- Proverbs 27:9 says, “Oil and perfume make the heart glad, so a man’s counsel is sweet to his friend.” Life is confusing sometimes. Having people who can help you navigate the chaos is essential. God puts people in our lives to help us choose wisely in tough circumstances. Sometimes we want someone else to choose for us. Sometimes we want someone to confirm us in our choices. A friend’s counsel is neither of these things. Counsel is advice, guidance, and perspective. It is information to help you choose well. But the choice is still ours. Learning to listen to counsel then choose wisely is a key aspect of true friendship.

- Proverbs 27:17 says, “Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” This proverb explains not just THAT friendship transforms us, but HOW it does so. Iron sharpens iron by friction. When it happens, sometimes sparks fly. This shows us that friendship isn’t primarily for our comfort. It is for our sanctification. We all have rough edges that need to be sanded down. God uses friends to do some of the sanding. Like the correction of a father, the correction of a friend is designed not to humiliate or condemn but to sharpen.
- Proverbs 27:6 says, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.” Being confronted or experiencing conflict can be hard. No one likes being told hard truth. This proverb reminds us to trust a friend’s heart even when their words may not be what we want to hear. The wounds of a friend are like the cuts of a surgeon, done to heal not to harm.

A Friend Cuts Slack (Proverbs 17:9)

Sometimes, however, we can take confrontation too far. Sometimes we use the familiarity with someone as an excuse to vent our own frustration or to criticize mercilessly. Sometimes what we have to learn is to stop confronting someone about every last little thing they do. Friends cut each other slack.

- Proverbs 17:9 says, “He who conceals a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates intimate friends.” This proverb doesn’t mean that friends help friends cover up crimes, nor does it mean that we should overlook repeated destructive behavior. This proverb is a reminder to give people room to grow. When we mess up, we don’t need someone else complaining about us to other people, or airing our dirty laundry to other people. This proverb encourages us to pursue reconciliation and love even in the midst of conflict. A friend can overlook an offense. A friend can confront you without talking bad about you to others. A friend seeks love.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How do we misuse or overuse the term “friend?”
2. Do you have any experiences of the power of friends to change others for good or bad? How can we still love people and be an influence for good in their lives without being influenced negatively by them?
3. What is the difference between a friend and an acquaintance? How does adversity reveal true friends? How have you seen this happen?
4. What does it mean that friends are “conscientious?” How can we share our lives with others on a deep level and still respect each other’s boundaries?
5. What does it mean that a friend “conceals a transgression?”

Rich Towards God

Proverbs 18:10-11

The Proverbs are full of wisdom for living. But sometimes the truth is we don't want wisdom. We either want confirmation that how we are living is acceptable, or we want simple tricks and life hacks that will help us get more of what we want out of life. When the wisdom we receive starts to impinge on how we want to live our lives, or threatens something sacred to us, we feel threatened and lash out.

One example of this is money. Simply say "money" in a church and people will start sighing or throwing up their hands or tuning you out or getting angry. No one wants to talk about money unless it is how to get God to give you more of it.

We shouldn't be shocked by this. In the Sermon on the Mount, He told His disciples that God and money were rivals. Matthew 6:24 says, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." In the same way that Joshua asked the people of Israel in Joshua 24:15, "choose for yourselves today whom you will serve," Jesus also asks His followers to decide whom they will serve: God or money. You can't serve both.

If we are going to be obedient followers of Jesus, we need to learn to see money for what it is: a blessing from God, a tool for serving him and others, but a lousy lord. Because money is so central to our lives, the Book of Proverbs provides numerous wise sayings to help us learn to see money for what it is and use it for what it is for.

The Provision of Money

- Seek God Not Money (10:22) - Money is a good thing. Proverbs recognizes that money provides security. Proverbs 10:15 says, "The rich man's wealth is his fortress; the ruin of the poor is their poverty." Problems come when we mistake the source of our money. Proverbs 10:22 says, "It is the blessing of the Lord that makes rich, and He adds no sorrow to it." This doesn't mean that all who are rich are blessed by God. It reminds us to see God as the ultimate source of security. Seeking money or security outside of God's provision will result in heartache. God promises to provide, and what He provides does not come with the problems of ill-gotten gain.
- Trust God Not Money (18:10-11) – Proverbs 18:10-11 highlights the tension between the true security of hoping in God and the false security of hoping in wealth. Proverbs 18:10-11 says, "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runs into it and is safe. A rich man's wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his own imagination." Notice that there are two strongholds in the verses: one provided by God and one provided by wealth. The difference is one is real (the righteous run to it and are safe); the other is illusory (a high wall in his own imagination). Wealth provides an illusion of protection.
- Seek Contentment Not Greed (15:16) –The security we are seeking in money is a lie. The only place security is found is in the hands of God. Proverbs 15:16 says, "Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and turmoil without it." If we seek God and learn to trust Him to provide what we need, we will find more peace and security than with all the riches we might think we want.

The Problem of Money

In 1 Timothy 6:10, Paul writes, “For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” Money is a good thing, but loving money leads to problems. It leads to all sorts of griefs into our lives. The proverbs are full of examples of problems that arise when we trust in money. Here are just a few examples.

- **Loving Money Won’t Save You** – Proverbs 11:4 says, “Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.” Money is useful for a lot of things. But money can’t buy everything. Loving money will convince you that anything can be bought. You can’t buy a relationship with God. You can’t buy your way into God’s favor or into right relationship with Him.
- **Loving Money Will Make You Arrogant** – Proverbs 28:11 says, “The rich man is wise in his own eyes, but the poor who has understanding sees through him.” Money convinces you that you are its master, that you acquired it by the sweat of your brow and by the ingenuity of your mind. Money will make you think you are special, different, better than people who have less than you.
- **Loving Money Will Make You Lie** – Proverbs 11:1 says, “A false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is His delight.” If money could satisfy, then you would think that the more wealthy a person became the more likely to be happy and content. But the truth is, the more we get, the more we think we need. The constant call of money is to believe that all your problems will be solved if you just had a little more. To get more, we will treat other people unfairly. We will exploit and deceive them and call it business sense. We will justify it because of the arrogance that has grown in us.
- **Loving Money Will Make You Hoard** – Proverbs 11:24 says, “And there is one who withholds what is justly due, and yet it results only in want.” Money will make you think you can’t live without it. You will wait as long as possible to pay what you owe. You will try to stockpile as much of it as you can for some later day and justify it by using words like nest egg, retirement, and investment. There is nothing wrong with any of it. Leaving a financial legacy for the next generation is a very biblical thing. Loving money, though, consumes you and makes you think about it all the time. You will miss the chance to serve others now because you are hoarding for the future.

The Purpose of Money Proverbs (11:24-28)

In Luke 12:16-21, Jesus told a parable about a rich man whose land had been so productive that his barns are busting at the seams. He reasoned to himself: “This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?’ So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

The rich man in this parable exhibits many of the negative characteristics described above that are produced in us by loving money. He is arrogant, thinks his money will save him, and wants to do all he can to get a little more. The parable invites us at the end to become “rich toward God.”

Becoming rich towards God begins when we realize the dangers of loving money and learn to start seeing money and ourselves in the correct light. Money is a good thing but it is not the greatest good. It is not the source of good. Money is a tool. When we stop seeing it as a tool for other things, we are in danger of considering it as a greater good than it is. Proverbs 11:24-28 shows us how to use wealth correctly.

- Giving Causes True Prosperity – Proverbs 11:24-25 says, “There is one who scatters, and yet increases all the more, and there is one who withholds what is justly due, and yet it results only in want. The generous man will be prosperous, and he who waters will himself be watered.” Money is meant to be spent. We aren’t supposed to waste it, but we need to realize that increase comes when we invest it in kingdom things. God gives to us to bless us. He also gives to us so that He can give through us. In Matthew 6:19-21, Jesus reminded his followers “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”
- Giving Causes True Security – Proverbs 11:28 says, “He who trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will flourish like the green leaf.” We hoard money in a hope of possessing this elusive thing called security. True security is found when we stop trusting our money, and start trusting God to continually provide daily bread. Seeking security in wealth leaves us deceived and in danger. In Revelation 3:17-18, Jesus tells the church at Laodicea, “Because you say, ‘I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,’ and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.”

The message is clear. We have been given money not just as a blessing to us, but so that we can be a blessing to others. We are promised that if we will learn to trust God more than money, and learn to use money for what it is for, God will give us what we need both to live and to serve Him through investing it in Kingdom Endeavors. In Luke 16:10-11, Jesus says, “10 He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. 11 Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you?”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What does it mean to trust God and not money?
2. How can we learn to see money as a blessing from God and useful tool but at the same time keep from loving it?
3. Have you ever experienced the dangers of loving money first hand?
4. How are we sometimes similar to the wealthy man of the parable in Luke 16? What should he/we do differently?
5. How does using our money wisely produce true prosperity and true security?

Learning to Look Towards God

Proverbs 30:1-9

Have you ever noticed how deceptive and manipulative commercials can be? Not all commercials, but many of them. Some simply make you aware of how their product satisfies a need you already have. But the bad ones try to convince you to buy something you don't really need. They try to generate a need in you so that you will want what they are selling. When it works and you realize after the fact that you didn't really have a need for their product, all sorts of negative emotions come flooding in.

Sometimes we approach sharing our faith like we are writing a bad commercial. We try to get people to realize the bad news so that they will accept our good news. The truth is, though, if you look at the life of Jesus, He almost never starts there. He finds people whose lives are broken by the choices they have made and He shows the real path that leads to life.

We live in a society racked with anxiety and depression. People feel overwhelmed and unfulfilled. Our whole world is crying out that the paths they have chosen are dead ends. We need to learn to be like Jesus and help people look beyond themselves and see how to get back on a path that leads to life.

Proverbs 30:1-9 tells the tale of one man's journey out of the dead end he found himself in. It shows us how we can learn to look beyond ourselves and find true fulfillment by looking to God.

A brief heads up: this proverb is one of the trickier ones. Many translators consider it one of the hardest to understand. There might be a little more technical "nuts and bolts" stuff. But if we persevere, we will find a powerful picture of how to orient our lives towards seeking God.

Look Beyond Yourself (vv. 1-3)

Verse 1 tells us that this proverb was not written by Solomon, but by a man named Agur. Not much is known about him except what is written here. He was the son of a man named Jakeh, whom we also know nothing about. One other piece of information we glean about him comes from the phrase translated in most Bibles as "the oracle." For several good reasons, it is more likely that the phrase means, "the Massaite." Massaites were a tribe of non-Israelites who lived on the Arabian Peninsula. They are mentioned in Genesis 25:14 and 1 Chronicles 1:30 as children of Ishmael. Remember this because it will come in handy in just a second. One reason why the word was incorrectly rendered as "the oracle" was because some people felt uncomfortable with having a non-Jewish author for a portion of the Jewish Scripture.

Verse 1 has another phrase that is hard to make sense of. Most English Bibles say something like: "to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ucal." The truth is that these words in Hebrew are difficult to translate so many people just turn these "hard to understand" words into names and consider them the people to whom this proverb is addressed. The reason these words can be mistaken for names is because Jewish names had meanings that often took a whole sentence to translate. Joshua means "the Lord is my salvation." Gabriel means "The Lord is my strength." The words in this verse, however, are not names that occur frequently anywhere else in the Bible. No Ucal is ever mentioned. Ithiel as a name occurs only once in Nehemiah 11:7.

The better answer is to consider them not as names but as sentences. When we do so, the Hebrew phrase means something like, “I am not God. I am not God that I should prevail” or “I have wearied myself, O God, I have wearied myself, O God, and come to an end.”

Though slightly different, both phrases reveal the author’s confession of his own inadequacies. He is exhausted, worn out by life, at the end of his rope.

The next verses confirm that we are on the right track by translating verse 1 the way we did. Verses 2 and 3 continue the description of a man who doesn’t have any more answers, doesn’t have what it takes, doesn’t know what to do next, or where to go.

All of us eventually find ourselves in a similar place. We all inevitably come to the end of ourselves. When we do so, what we do next can change everything.

Look to God (v. 4)

When we come to the end of ourselves, the world gives us a lot of bad advice. Many times we are told not to be discouraged but to believe in ourselves. We are encouraged to motivate ourselves and keep going by the sweat of our brow. We use terms like “step up” and “grind it out” to refer to how we try to keep going when we are worn out. But trying harder to look to ourselves leads to more exhaustion and further guilt, anxiety, and depression. If it’s all up to you and you don’t have anything left in the tank, then your only choices are to burn out or accept failure.

In verse 4, Agur directs his attention to God. He realizes that he isn’t alone and that it isn’t all up to him. This verse is phrased in the form of a series of questions. But these are rhetorical questions. He knows the answer. The answer is God. He highlights three reasons we should look to God and learn to rely on Him.

- God Connects – “who has ascended...descended.” – God is not disconnected from his creation. He is involved and invested. He calls us into relationship. You don’t have to ascend to heaven to find God. He connects with us.
- God Controls – “who has gathered...wrapped...” – God is not just connected to the world, He is in control of it. When you feel overwhelmed by life, realize that God isn’t.
- God Creates – The reason God is in control is because He created the world. It is His. He made it. He loves it. He is at work in it.

The last phrase in verse 4, “what is His name or His son’s name,” is another tricky part. Many ancient cultures didn’t have last names. A person was known by his name and the name of his father or son. We still have last names like this in English. Maybe you know someone named Johnson. To ask “what is his name and his son’s or father’s name” was a way of saying “tell me the man’s first and last name.” The questions highlighted the fact the God was the answer to the question because no man could do what God is described as doing in these verses.

Often when we look beyond ourselves, we are tempted to rely on others who are more powerful than us. Having good friends and examples are essential, but looking to them for fulfillment will end up producing the same bankruptcy as when we looked to ourselves. The best examples, friends, family, and role models are people who point us not to themselves but to God. Like Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Imitate me, even as I imitate Christ.”

Look to God's Word (vv. 5-6)

Many scholars consider the last phrase of verse 4 as a riddle. "What is His name or His son's name?" As we saw earlier, the answer is God. But there might be a little more hidden here. The reference to the "son" is a way of further clarifying which god the author is talking about. Remember earlier when we talked about Agur being a Massaite, not Jewish. Reference to a son is a way for the author to show that he is talking about not just any God but the God of Israel. Exodus 4:22 says, "Thus says the Lord, 'Israel is My son, My firstborn.'"

This non-Jewish person has discovered that there is only one God worth seeking, the God of Israel. That is why he immediately turns next to encouraging us to look to God by studying His word. The God of Israel made a covenant. He gave a revelation of Himself in the Law. He calls us into relationship with him.

You don't study the Bible to know facts. You study the Bible to look to God. As we do, we will find out two things.

- **God's Word Works** "Every word of God is tested" – God's word is tried and tested. It is a proven path to finding life. This world offers a person countless options about which way to follow. The best question to ask is not whether the path looks nice, or who will be on the journey with me, but where does it go. The best way to find an answer is to look at the others who have already walked this path. Where did it lead them? What kind of person did it make them? God's word is tested. It works. It will lead you to live. As GK Chesterton famously said, "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried."
- **God's Word Protects** "He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him." – God's laws aren't there to condemn us or ruin our lives. He tells us the path to go not so that we will miss out on life, but so that we will miss out on life's heartache caused by sin and rebellion.

Look to God's Will (vv. 7-9)

Agur encourages his readers to look to God, not just any God, but the God of Israel, the God of revelation. He then addresses God and makes a request. His request reveals a heart eager for God's will. His own will has produced weariness. He wants what God has for him. God's will can be a frustrating topic to discuss. Sometimes we want God to just tell us what to do. We forget that God wants us to be more than obedient robots. These verses express the starting point for seeking God's will.

- **Seek a Relationship with God** (v. 7) – It shouldn't be overlooked that Agur addresses his request to God. He couldn't have sought God by reading the word, and saying to himself, "okay, I guess I need to do what it says." Many people do that. They think God's word is a list of ethical principles to be lived out. Though true, it's not the whole story. God is personal and calls us to engage with Him personally. The first best response to reading God's word is to pray and see if God doesn't respond.
- **Seek the Righteousness of God** (v. 8a) – God's will is inseparable from his righteousness. In 1 Thesalonians 4:3, Paul says. "For this is the will of God, your sanctification." Agur then asks God to help him be righteous. This is something God is eager to do. Hebrews 4:16 says that God has given us "grace to help in time of need." Jesus tells us in the Lord's Prayer to ask God, "lead us not into temptation." God is eager to help us be righteous. We don't always want it though. We need to realize that the life God has for us comes through righteousness but that we can't be righteous on our own. We need God's help. Righteousness without relationship is impossible.

- Seek the Riches of God (vv. 8b-9) – Last, Agur asks for contentment. He doesn't think he can use God to get what he wants. He wants what God has for him. He realizes what God gives him is designed to help him be the best version of himself. He knows that if God gave him more than he could handle he would forget God, and if God gave him less then it might make him do things he shouldn't. He trusts God to know his needs and give him what is best. How hard it is for us to say, and mean, "Feed me with the food that is my portion."

Conclusion

We all find ourselves at low points where the answers we have for our lives are all used up. We have to learn to look beyond ourselves and see God. Not just any God will do. We need the God of Israel revealed in Scripture and most perfectly made known to us in Jesus. Learning to live in relationship with Him and rely on Him is the only thing that will fill us up.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever felt exhausted and wearied by life? How do we sometimes look to ourselves or other people to escape those times?
2. How can we learn to realize our need for God?
3. What does it mean to look to God by studying the scriptures? What are some bad ways of reading scripture?
4. How can we learn to desire and be content with God's will?
5. How is God's will inseparable from His righteousness?

Wedded to Wisdom

Proverbs 31:10-31

There are certain subjects that we have a difficult time discussing. Two of the biggest hot potatoes are race and gender. Maybe it is because a few people have strong, vocal, abrasive opinions so we learn to steer clear on the subject to avoid another tirade. Maybe it's because these two topics in particular have been used throughout time to marginalize or oppress whole groups of people.

But race and gender are gifts from God. Revelation 7:9 describes a scene of perpetual worship around the throne of God in heaven, in which there is “a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues.” Our languages, culture, and race won't be flattened out in the resurrection. Every people and every language will be represented before the throne of God. In Genesis 1:27, our genders are described as unique manifestations of the image of God: “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

The problem is that when we avoid such topics, clear, Biblically-based guidance is frequently absent from the church. In the absence of God honoring and loving discussion of these topics, people are left to search on their own for what the Bible says on a certain subject. The end result is that passages are sometimes taken out of context, or misunderstood, or misapplied.

One such passage is found in Proverbs 31. The book of Proverbs ends with a description of the ideal woman. This passage has been used by some men as a checklist of what they should be looking for in a wife and by some women as a description of all the things that are expected of them if they want to play the part of a “good wife.”

The problem is that this list is oddly specific. The woman described gathers wool, makes all the clothes, cooks all the food, does charity work, sells in the market, and buys property. Taking this as a literal description of what a “Christian woman” should be ends up creating odd expectations in both men and women, and lays a burden on someone when they fail to live up to an impossible list of things that seem difficult to recreate in modern society.

Though there are passages in the Bible that point us toward a sound understanding of what Biblical manhood and womanhood mean, I would like to suggest that this is not the primary purpose of Proverbs 31. Here are a handful of reasons to think that this part of Proverbs requires a different approach. First, this poem is at the very end of the book. This should suggest that its placement might be significant. Proverbs was an organized collection. In the same way that it starts with a description of what the book is for, perhaps it ends with a similar summary. Second, throughout the book, wisdom is personified as a woman. In fact, after the introduction to Proverbs, the book starts out in Proverbs 1:20 with the Woman Wisdom crying out to people trying to get them to follow her: “Wisdom shouts in the street, She lifts her voice in the square.” Third, as a description of an ideal wife it is very incomplete. All the attributes of the woman in Proverbs 31 are focused on her contribution to the “function” of her family and neglect how she “relates” to her family. We see what she “does” for her family but not how she “treats” her family.

All of this points to the fact that Proverbs 31 should perhaps be understood as an allegory, or a symbol, a description of the benefits and blessings bestowed on a home when we decide to be wedded to Wisdom.

In our first study in Proverbs, we saw that there are three dimensions to wisdom: *moral, practical, and theological*. The picture of wisdom presented in this final chapter of Proverbs includes the moral dimension (v. 12: She does him good and not evil all the days of his life) and the theological (v. 30: a woman who fears the Lord, she should be praised), but the bulk of this section is focused on the practical benefits of wisdom on everyday life.

Wisdom Helps You Work Hard (vv. 13-15)

Wisdom reminds us that hard work has value. Sometimes we devalue jobs that have a manual labor component. But the truth is that hard work is important.

- The Wise Person Finds What Is Needed (v. 13) – Have you ever seen people sitting around waiting because something necessary for them to get to work is missing? Sometimes we use excuses like this as a reason not to work. The woman in this passage doesn't wait for someone else or look for reasons not to work. She moves and looks for the wool and flax she needs.
- The Wise Person Takes Joy in Work (v. 13) – Verse 13 says, "She works with her hands in delight." The woman in this passage takes joy in her manual labor. Not all types of work are pleasing to everyone. Sometimes it is important to find the right work. But wisdom helps us see value in the work of our hands. The foolish person wants everything to be done for them. The foolish person hasn't learned to take joy in the work that they do.
- The Wise Person Does What Is Needed (vv. 14-15) – Sometimes people use the absence of joy as an excuse not to work. Sometimes, though, when people say that they don't find joy in work, what they mean is that they don't find work fun or entertaining. Sometimes work is work. The wise person does what needs to be done, even when it isn't particularly fun. Verse 14 compares the wise woman to a merchant ship. Ancient cultures saw sailing as a risky and anxious endeavor only to be attempted by brave or desperate people. Verse 15 says, "She rises while it is still night." Without alarm clocks, most people would wake up with the sun. Both of these phrases show us that the wise person doesn't just seek out the fun or easy work, but is willing to do what is required to get the job done, even when it is unpleasant or uncomfortable.

Wisdom Helps You Work Smart (vv. 16-19)

Wisdom doesn't just show us the value of hard work, it helps us find ways to work smarter.

- The Wise Person Plans the Work (v. 16) – Sometimes work is hard. Work is harder when you are trying to work under unfavorable circumstances. A farmer working on unfertile soil will have to work harder than a farmer with a good field. Verse 16 says, "She considers a field and buys it...she plants a vineyard." The woman in this passages evaluates fields, buys one, and plants a vineyard there. She is looking for the best place she can find to do her work. Wisdom shows us how to find the most optimal conditions for us to succeed. Wisdom helps us to plan our work in such a way that will be most beneficial.
- The Wise Person Prepares Themselves (v. 17) – Sometimes work is hard. Work is harder when we our-

selves are not prepared to do it. The woman in the passage “girds herself with strength” and “makes her arm strong.” This means that she makes sure she is ready to do the work. Sometimes we think that we have to be naturally and instantaneously good at something the moment we start. There is something to be said for pursuing work in the area of our giftedness. But giftedness doesn’t mean that we won’t have to grow and develop and prepare. Wisdom reminds us that even when we are doing work we enjoy, we still need to prepare ourselves for the work as well.

- The Wise Person Perseveres (v. 18) – Sometimes work is hard. Work is harder when it doesn’t go as we had planned. We all have a fight or flight response. When things don’t go as planned, we have a tendency to want to get out. Wisdom helps us persevere when we feel like giving up. The woman in verse 18 doesn’t give up even when work takes longer than expected. In the ancient world, light at night was a luxury. To light a candle or lamp was often an extravagance. Most people worked only during the day. When it got dark outside, most people just went to bed. So for her to light a lamp and keep working shows both that her work took longer than she was expecting and that she perseveres and sacrifices in order to get the job done.

Wisdom Helps You Bless Others (vv. 20-27)

The first sections of this passage are focused on work. There is a danger that we can become too focused on work, causing us to become greedy or self-absorbed. This passage goes on to describe how wisdom will lead a person to bless others.

- The Wise Person Has Compassion (v. 20) – Not everyone has the same opportunities. The wise person sees the abundance that they possess as a tool for blessing others. Verse 20 says, “she extends her hand to the poor, and she stretched out her hands to the needy.” We sometimes assume that we are better than people who have less than us. We assume that if they would just work harder, they could get out of their predicament. We tell them to learn to make smarter choices with their lives. Wisdom encourages to be compassionate, to bless other people instead of beating them up with their past choices that can’t be changed.
- The Wise Person Has Commitment (vv. 21-24) – Wisdom helps us stay devoted to the people we ought to serve first. The woman in this passage looks out for herself (v. 22), but also the members of her household (v. 21) and her husband (vv. 23-24). We live in a society that encourages us to look out for ourselves first. Wisdom will help you look after yourself, but it will also show you how to bless those you should be committed to: your spouse, your family, etc.
- The Wise Person Has Counsel (vv. 25-27) – Wisdom will help us bless others with our counsel. Verse 26 says, “She opens her mouth in wisdom and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.” The wise person will be able to guide others down the right path. Notice, though, this aspect of wisdom comes last. Many people want to tell other people what to do instead of working themselves. The wise person first works and blesses before they open their mouth.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do we sometimes devalue manual labor? How can we learn to take joy in working hard? Have you ever experienced joy doing work that you didn't think you would enjoy?
2. How does wisdom help us work smarter? What does it mean to prepare ourselves to work?
3. How does perseverance factor into wise planning?
4. How is our world sometimes uncompassionate towards the poor and needy? Why? How can we learn to be compassionate and merciful?
5. Do you know somebody who likes to dispense advice but doesn't end up helping or blessing anybody? How can we learn to discern the right time for giving counsel to others?