The Beginning of Wisdom

Text: Proverbs 1

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**Scriptures:** 1 Corinthians 1:18-24; Proverbs 1

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL]317, 49, 111, 313, 525

**Series: Proverbs.** Sermon 1

**Theme:** The book of Proverbs begins with a clear purpose and a foundational principle which is illustrated in the pathway of the foolish in contrast to the wise person who listens to instruction.

**FCF** (Fallen Condition Focus): We are naturally foolish being alienated from God who is the only source of true wisdom.

**Proposition:** Know wisdom, know Christ.

**Introduction**

What would you like to have engraved on your tombstone? “I told you I was sick!” “I knew this would happen”. Here’s an epitaph that I think we’d all desire: “*Here lies the body of a person whose life was well lived*”. The basic question “what does it look like to live a good life?”

Is answered by the ‘wisdom literature’ of the Bible, which we find concentrated in 3 OT books: Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. (The NT letter of James can also be placed in this category of wisdom literature).

It’s quite possible, even likely, that you’ve never heard a sermon series through the book of Proverbs. Some of the reasons why this section of the Bible is seldom preached in a systematic way Lord’s Day by Lord’s Day are:

1. After chapter 9, the remainder of this book is a conglomeration of different maxims, mottos and memorable sayings with little or no clear sustained structure or flow.
2. Some of the Hebrew in which the book was originally written is difficult to interpret – which accounts for some wide variations in translation between different Bible versions.
3. It is particularly challenging to consistently preach Christ from this book and to identify the Gospel which flows out from these divinely-inspired words.

Yet, our desire, as God’s people, is to hear his whole counsel and will: Acts 20:27. We don’t want to miss out on the treasures which have been laid down for our enrichment in this book.

The approach over the next 3 or so months is to work through the first 9 chapters of the book in sequence, but to branch off to consider a number of the key topics covered as related concepts arise from the text of these 1st 9 chapters. This will enable us to cover some, but by no means all, of the areas of wisdom in the book, including:

1. Health
2. Money/wealth
3. Family Life (including marriage)
4. Friendship
5. Work
6. Sexual Immorality
7. Anger

Even a brief look at this book reveals that it is all about wisdom, in fact the purpose of the whole collection of proverbs is clearly laid out for us in v2-6: “*To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth- Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles.”*

Notice the different words which build up the meaning of this wisdom which may be learned: insight, prudence, discretion. Notice also that wisdom is **not only** for the young, but also for those who are already wise…In fact the wise person is characterized by being a continuous leaner. “*An intelligent heart acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge.*” (Prov 18.15)

Our goal in this preaching series in the book of Proverbs is certainly to acquire knowledge, but more than that it is to love Christ more, for He is ‘the power of God and the wisdom of God’ (1 Cor 1.24b).

So let’s begin!

1. **Wise teachers instruct the wise**

The first person we meet in the book of Proverbs is Solomon. His name is there in the first verse - which is very much a title for the whole book. Solomon, a son of David, the king who inherited a large kingdom and accumulated much wealth during his 40 years of reign over Israel from around 970BC – almost 3,000 years ago. Solomon was the man who pleased the Lord his God by asking for an ‘understanding mind’. (1 Ki 3.9)

It was the Lord God who gifted this man with ‘a wise and discerning mind’ (1 Ki 3.12) unlike any descendant of Adam has had before or since. We read in 1 Kings 4:29 that “*God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore*”. Solomon’s wisdom was known throughout the world at that time. People of all nations came to hear the words of this wise man.

Not only did Solomon speak wise words, he also wrote them down. In this book of Proverbs, he is likely the **Direct Author** of much of the collected material, but not all. We can see this clearly as we briefly review the different sections of the book, which can be divided into 7 parts (ref. Waltke):

1. The Title, purpose and foundational principle (1.1-9) – our focus today
2. Collection 2 – Solomon 1 (10.1-22.16) – largest single section
3. Collection 3 – 30 sayings of the wise (22.17-24.22)
4. Collection 4 – further sayings of the wise (24.23-34)
5. Collection 5 – Solomon 2 (25.1-29.27)
6. Collection 6 – The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh (30.1-33)
7. Collection 7 – The sayings of Lemuel (31.1-31)

The ‘sayings of the (unnamed) wise’ are included, together with the wisdom of Agur and Lemuel. Unlike Solomon, the identities of Agur and Lemuel are not known. There are indications that Agur was an Ishmaelite. We know that King Lemuel, who was taught wisdom by his mother (31.1) was not an Israelite king.

A legitimate question then would be ‘of what particular value is this book of Proverbs to us today, thousands of years after they were written, in part by people we know hardly anything about?’ You might also wonder whether the wisdom of Solomon, whose life is recorded in some detail in the first 11 chapters of 1 Kings, is really so helpful. We know that whilst this king achieved so much, he was a man who was not wholly true to the Lord His God when his non-Israelite wives ‘turned away his heart after other gods’. (1 Kings 11:4)

We know that Solomon’s son Rehoboam was not a wise man… he abandoned the wise counsel that the old men gave him (1 Ki 12:8) resulting in the division of the Kingdom of Israel, a rift from which the nation would never fully recover. If Solomon’s wisdom was not compelling enough to convince his own son of the value of his words, how much can they help us?...

If these proverbs were merely of human origin, they might be of some value, but they would not be the wisdom of a perfect mind. Why is this? Because our first ancestors, Adam and Eve, rejected the wise counsel of their wise Maker. The result? **distortion, damage and downgrading** of their ability to think rightly about themselves, others and the world around them. In the words of Romans 1.21-22 Adam, Eve and all their descendants naturally became ‘*futile in their thinking…claiming to be wise, they became fools*’.

The truth is that this book, whilst being authored humanly-speaking, by Solomon, Agur, Lemuel and possibly others, is the work of a **single** Divine Author – God Himself. The Book of Proverbs is part of His inspired Word, the Bible. True Wisdom is the **very mind** of God. God is a Thinker, and what He thinks is pure wisdom. Some of His thoughts are contained in this book of Proverbs. God is a Doer…and what He does demonstrates his wisdom in action. God is a Speaker…and what He speaks reveals His perfect wisdom.

Ultimately it is God Himself who is the Wise Teacher in the book of Proverbs… He is the one who instructs those wise enough to seek His knowledge. The mind of God is the **only source of all true wisdom**, a truth which is expressed in the first proverb of this book: ‘*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge*’ (Prov 1.7a). Here ‘the beginning’ is not so much the starting point which is left behind as progress is made, but rather the **foundational controlling principle** of all true wisdom:

Because this is the root of all wisdom, it’s not surprising that we found this same truth expressed elsewhere in Biblical wisdom literature: '*Behold, the* ***fear*** *of the Lord, that is wisdom*’ (**Job 28:28b**); **‘***The end of the matter; all has been heard.* ***Fear*** *God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man*’ (Ecc 12.13).

We must be careful here to understand the word ‘fear’ correctly. This is **NOT the terror and dread** which comes to those who turn away from God. Remember fallen Adam and Eve hiding in fear from God among the trees of the garden. (Gen 3:8) This fear is **willing submissive reverence** toward God, as shown by Abraham when he was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac. Remember after he had demonstrated faith, hope and love for God, the Angel of the Lord said to him “*now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me*". (Gen 22.12)

Wisdom then is not the mere accumulation of knowledge. Wisdom is not the development of abstract intellectual understanding. Wisdom is insight and discretion gained by being in willing submission to the LORD, the covenant God who first revealed His name as Yahweh - ‘I AM’ to Moses.

So, the first part of the first proverb ‘*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom’* teaches us that whilst wisdom is the right way of thinking about God, the world He has made, and people who inhabit this world (including ourselves, our family, our friends and others). It is fundamentally and foundationally having the **right relationship** with God – a relationship characterised by faith, hope and love…

The wise person then is not someone who necessarily possesses great intellect, has accumulated vast stores of knowledge, or who is known for maxims, mottos and memorable sayings, but rather **the wise person is someone who fears the Lord, who willingly, trustingly and, in hope, submits to the loving will and purpose of the God with whom that wise person has a living relationship**…

This first proverb makes the first of many contrasts in this book, which brings us to our second point:

1. **Fools and their companions reject wisdom**

Have you ever written an essay? At school or university? Often essay questions are phrased ‘compare and contrast’. Being able to accurately explain the differences between two groups of information demonstrates understanding…

The basic meaning of the Hebrew word translated ‘proverb’ (masal) is a **comparison** and we see in this book many contrasts between the wise and foolish, the righteous and the wicked, life and death, for example: v7 ‘The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, fools despise wisdom and instruction’.

Here we meet the one of many types of people described in the book of Proverbs: The **fool.** Have you ever met anyone who could be described as a ‘know it all’? Whatever subject or topic is raised, this person knows all about it. They are generally keen to teach others, but not to learn themselves. In their mind, wisdom only flows in one direction – outwards from them! Such a person demonstrates folly.

The fool is unteachable, hating knowledge, rejecting counsel and despising reproof/ correction. (1.29) The fool is a person whose root problem is not mental, but spiritual. The fool rejects God, in the words of 1.29 the fool ‘does not choose the fear of the LORD’. The fool likes his folly and keeps going back to it ‘*like a dog returning to his vomit*’. (26.11) It’s not a ‘pretty picture’ is it? But it describes some of the behaviour of people like you and me more accurately than we might care to admit...either to ourselves or to others…**Fools reject wisdom.**

We also meet some companions of fools - ‘sinners’ here in chapter 1 – they are companions of fools. Now we know that all the descendants of Adam are conceived in sin, but here the ‘sinner’ is a person whose life is **consistently characterized** by patterns of consistent wickedness and evil. The pathway of their lives is illustrated in v11-19. They love injustice, violence, and greed. They delight to entice others to come and join them...they are tempters. These sinners are without wisdom – they do not know that whilst sin brings pleasure at first and often personal profit, ‘the sting is in the tail’ **–** it seems good at first, but the unpleasant part comes at the end. **v18** *but these men lie in wait for their own blood; they set an ambush for their own lives;* v19 *Such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain; it takes away the life of its possessors.*

To be wise is to know where a particular direction in life is likely to end up. “*The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it*” (Prov 27.12).

How much of the suffering in your life is due, at least in part, to your own lack of wisdom? For people like you and me, likely more than we might care to admit...either to ourselves or to others…**Sinners reject wisdom.**

Next, we meet the ‘simple’ (v22) – also companions of fools. Here the simple (peti) person is someone who is easily led, gullible, silly, naïve, wilful, irresponsible, unstable, aimless, inexperienced. The simple person drifts into temptation, - he/she prefers not to accept discipline when it is offered (1.22-32).

How many of the patterns of thought, word and behaviour in your life demonstrate a drifting into temptation – you know, in those areas where you are weak and vulnerable. How often do we refuse the loving discipline of the Lord and of others? For people like you and me, likely more often than we might care to admit...either to ourselves or to others… **The simple reject wisdom.**

We also met scoffers here in v22 – also companions of fools. The scoffer shares with others in this ‘fools gallery’ a dislike of correction (9:7, 8; 13:1; 15:12). The scoffer is a deliberate trouble-maker (21:24; 22:10; 29:8). “*’Scoffer’ is the name of the arrogant, haughty man who acts with arrogant pride*” (Pro 21.24).

Not many, if any of us, would willingly be called a scoffer, but how often do people like you and me act with arrogant pride? - likely more often than we might care to admit...either to ourselves or to others… **Scoffers reject wisdom**

Fools and their companions: sinners, the simple and the scoffers are all travelling the same path – the broad, easy, way that leads to destruction (Matt 7.13) Why? – Here is the wisdom of God:

“*Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices. For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them*” (Prov 1:29-32)

Is there any hope for the fool, the sinner, the simple and the scoffer? The book of Proverbs brings the clear answer: YES! The Lord God, personified in a wise woman who cries out in the streets says (v33) “*whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster*" Which brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **The Wisdom of God is Christ**

Most of us have put the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle together – aided by the picture on the box. Have you ever done a WASGIJ – where you only see a picture of people looking at the subject of the jigsaw? It’s much harder!

The Book of Proverbs has been described as being like a 1000-word puzzle with no picture to show us what the puzzle is supposed to look like – how then do we put so many different pieces together?

We’ve seen that the foundational, controlling principle of true wisdom is that “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom”. We’ve understood that ‘fear’ here is not terror, not a running away from God, but rather the exact opposite, we could say a ‘running towards God’. We’ve seen that true wisdom is not about having a great intellect or even the mere accumulation of knowledge, but rather wisdom is Fundamentally and foundationally having the **right relationship with God** – a relationship characterised by faith, hope and love… the kind of ‘fear of the Lord’ which Abraham was commended by the angel of the Lord

How is such a relationship possible for people like you and me? People who have a natural in-built tendency to prefer the pathways of fools, sinners, the simple and scoffers? Only through faith in Christ, a faith which comes from hearing the Word of Christ (Rom 10.17). We won’t find Jesus Christ directly referred to by name in the book of Proverbs, but if we seek diligently we will find that all the Scriptures concern him (Luke 24.27) –Proverbs is no exception!

Christ then is the key to unlocking the ‘puzzle’ of the book of Proverbs. We know that as a child, Jesus was filled with wisdom (Luke 2:40). In His perfect humanity, Jesus was the wise son who heard his heavenly father’s instruction (1.8).

Parents, have you ever left one of your children behind at the church building, thinking he/she had gone with someone else? Jenny and I have – more than once! Well…there is a Biblical precedence…Joseph and Mary left 12-year-old Jesus in Jerusalem!

We read in Luke 2:46 “After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers”. Notice that Jesus was a learner…he listened to his teachers… We know that as he grew, Jesus increased in wisdom (Luke 2.52). If this was important for the perfect man, how much more for you and for me? The crowds later marvelled at his wisdom (Matt 13.54). He repeatedly silenced the most learned with his wise answers.

We know that Solomon was Israel’s wisest king, and likely the wisest descendant of Adam ever to have lived, yet Jesus said: ‘*One greater than Solomon is here*’ (Matt 12:42; cf. 1 Kings 4:32; Matt 11:19). We might stop here and arrive at the conclusion that Jesus is a good example of a ‘wise life well lived’. There is certainly truth in that! But there is so much more! Jesus is Himself the very wisdom of God in flesh. As the Apostle Paul puts it “*Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*” (Col 2.3b)

If you would know wisdom, most certainly the book of Proverbs will be of help to you. But unless you know Christ, you will remain a fool, a sinner, a simple one, an arrogant scoffer…This book of proverbs – of ‘comparisons’, presents only two pathways for life: the wise or the foolish, the righteous or the wicked, the living or the dead…

There are two ways set before us all today…The easy way that leads to destruction – many travel this way in the company of fools, sinners, the simple and scoffers. The hard way which leads to life – few travel this way, but those who do are wise.

The road you travel in life both now and forever, is determined by whether you will listen to the voice of God (v33). When we listen to His perfect wisdom in reverent fear – in love, faith and hope – trusting in Christ, then we can begin to think God’s thoughts after Him. We begin to be instructed by the Perfectly Wise One. "*We have the mind of Christ*" (1 Corinthians. 2:16). Our desires, which flow out from our thoughts, change more and more to love what God loves, and to hate what He hates.

What would you like to be engraved on your tombstone?

“*Here lies the body of a person whose life was well lived*”.

…..a person who knew Christ, the Wisdom of God.

AMEN