

## The Book of PROVERBS

Wisdom: godly living in an ungodly world - a series of five Bible Studies by Roger Green

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### INTRODUCTION

The Book of Proverbs can seem a bit like someone's lifetime collection of Chinese fortune cookie messages, scribbled down in the order they came out of the bag.

While the book is certainly not devoid of structure, you can't help but be struck by the seemingly random way in which proverbs are scattered through the book. This has meant that these five Bible studies are more thematic in nature, as I have endeavoured to pull verses together on a particular topic. As a result you will be doing a bit more page flicking than normal – but may I suggest that you also use these five weeks to read Proverbs chapter by chapter. If you read a chapter each day it will take you a month.

In contrast to the messages of advice from inside a Chinese fortune cookie, the wisdom of the book of Proverbs finds its origin in God himself. While the book is primarily attributed to King Solomon, with contributions from others such as Agur and Lemuel, it is ultimately not the wise sayings of a bunch of wise men – it is the communication of God's truth about how to live in his world. The book of Proverbs applies the principles of God's teaching to the whole of life – to relationships, home, work, justice, decisions, attitudes, reactions, everything we do and say and even think. Many of these themes are brought to life in vivid, imaginative, often humorous word pictures. It puts a mirror up to our lives and says, 'Are you like this? Is there a better way to live?'

The Old Testament is always pointing us forward to the coming of Christ. The personification of wisdom in the book of Proverbs is an example of this. Jesus Christ is the wisdom of God come in the flesh, and he is also in his humanity the perfect expression of human wisdom lived in response to God's wisdom.

### SUGGESTED READING

Tyndale Old Testament Commentary: Proverbs	Derek Kidner
The Bible Speaks Today: Proverbs	David Atkinson
Proverbs – Be skillful	Warren Wiersbe
The tree of life: reading Proverbs today	Graeme Goldsworthy

For further reading:

Gospel and wisdom	Graeme Goldsworthy
Wisdom to live by	Derek Kidner

## Study 1 Get wise!

### Warm up

1. What are the qualities of a wise person?

### Bible study and discussion

2. Read Proverbs 1:1-6. What do these verses tell us about the purpose of the book and for whom it was written?
3. 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge/wisdom'. (See Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10; Psalm 111:10; Job 28:28). What does it mean to fear the Lord?
4. 'I fear God yet am not afraid of him.' A right fear of God is not meant to immobilise you, but to cause you to pay attention when he speaks and to obey when he commands. What do the following passages teach us about how and why we should live each day in 'the fear of the Lord'?

Prov 3:1-7

Prov 14:26-27

Prov 23:17-18

5. Why is 'the fear of the Lord' so important if we are to gain wisdom?
6. How do we gain wisdom? Is it a gift from God, or something that we learn and develop, or both?

Prov 2:1-9

James 1:5

Matt 7:24-27

Prov 4:1-7

7. What are some of the benefits of living wisely? (See Proverbs 2:9-12 and Proverbs 3:4 & 13-18.)

8. It is important to realise that proverbs are not unqualified promises from God. A proverb is a wise saying. Most of the proverbs are generalised conclusions about how the world works under God's providential rule.

What is the danger in taking each of the following proverbs as a promise?

Prov 3:1-2

Prov 15:1

Prov 22:6

9. We think of the heart as the seat of emotions (eg 'I love you with all my heart'). But in the Bible the heart is the seat of the whole person. It includes what you treasure as well as what you set your affections and thoughts on. What you set your mind and emotions on will determine where you go and what you do. So, we read in Proverbs 4:23, 'Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life'. (Note that the verses that follow unpack this by mentioning 'mouth', 'lips', 'eyes' and 'feet'.)

In what ways is God challenging you to 'guard your heart'?

## Study 2 Making wise choices

### Warm up

1. In what ways have you been challenged lately?

### Bible study and discussion

In the book of Proverbs 'the wicked' are often contrasted with 'the good' and 'the righteous'. The wise person is often contrasted with the simple, the mocker/scorner, and the fool. The simple are those who are naïve and believe anything; they lack the ability to distinguish between truth and error (14:15). The mocker/scorner thinks he or she knows everything and is not open to being taught (21:24). The fool in Proverbs is not the one with a low IQ or deficient education but the one who fails to acknowledge God and submit to him. As we will see in this study, we hear competing voices of wisdom and folly every day. The big question is: Who will you listen to? Will you be wise or will you be a fool?

2. In Proverbs 9 we find a description of 'Lady Wisdom' (vv 1-6) and 'Madam Folly' (vv 13-17).

(a) What similarities and differences can you see between them?

(b) Who is Madam Folly identified with? (Refer to 7:10-11.)

(c) What are the 'stolen water' and the 'food eaten in secret' (9:17)? (Refer also to 7:10-21.)

(d) What is the result of accepting Madam Folly's invitation (9:18)? (See also to 5:3-5 & 22; 6:25-29; 7:22-27).

(e) How do we stand firm against sexual temptation?

(Consider the following verses: Proverbs 4:23-27; 5:15-23; 6:20-23; 7:1-5; 9:8-9.)

3. While Chapters 5-9 have focused on sexual sin, folly can be seen in more general terms as a focus on self (self-indulgence, self-gratification, self-interest etc.) usually at the expense of others and leaving God out of the picture. What do the following verses tell us about folly and the fool?  
Prov 1:7

Prov 12:15

Prov 15:2

Prov 17:24

Prov 21:20

Prov 28:26

Prov 29:11

Luke 12:13-21

Matt 25:1-13

4. The personification of wisdom occurs frequently in Proverbs (eg 1:20-21; 3:15-18; Chapter 8; 9:1-6) and it leads us to the thought that true wisdom lies in a person. The New Testament unearths the person – Jesus Christ. Jesus is the embodiment of wisdom (Isaiah 11:1-3a, Matthew 12:41-42, 1 Corinthians 1:24 & 30, and also Colossians 2:2-3).

Compare the invitation that Jesus gives us with the invitation of Lady Wisdom (Proverbs 9:1-6), by looking up the following verses:

Luke 14:15-24

John 4:13-14

John 6:51

John 10:10

5. Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. These verses contrast the 'wisdom of the world' (v 20) with the 'wisdom of God' (v 24). Can you identify a particular situation you have faced or are facing where 'the wisdom of the world' is in conflict with the 'wisdom of God'? How did you handle it or how are you handling it?

## Study 3 Words – a matter of life and death

### Warm up

1. Separate into groups of two or three and see how many old proverbs (not necessarily from the Bible) you can come up with in three minutes. Here's one to start you off: 'A stitch in time ...'

### Bible study and discussion

2. 'Sticks and stones can break my bones but names can never hurt me.' What do Proverbs 10:11 and 18:21 and James 3:3-8 tell us about the power of our tongue?

3. (a) What do the following verses teach us about telling the truth and telling lies?

Prov 12:19 & 22

16:13

17:4

24:26

25:18

(b) Is there any difference between a 'white lie' and a lie? Is there ever a place for not telling the truth?

4. (a) What do the following verses tell us about slander and gossip?

Prov 11:13

16:27-28

18:8

20:19

25:23

26:20

(b) When does our conversation about others become gossip? What are some helpful limits or guidelines that would guard us from gossiping?

5. It is often said that God gave us two ears and only one mouth for a reason.

(a) What do the following verses teach us about responding to others?

Prov 10:19

15:1 & 28

18:13

21:23

(b) What do you make of Proverbs 26:4 & 5?

6. (a) What do the following verses tell us about words that can bring healing and encouragement?

Prov 12:18

12:25

15:4 & 7

16:21-24

(b) Can you give an example of how someone has spoken wise words that have brought healing or encouragement to you?

7. (a) What do the following verses tell us about rebuking and correcting others?

Prov 15:31

25:11-13

27:5-6

28:23

(b) When is this appropriate, and how should we go about restoring a sinning brother or sister? You might like to consider Matthew 7:3-5, Matthew 18:15-20 and Ephesians 4:15 in your answer.

8. Read James 3:9-12 and Jesus' words to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:34-37. Ultimately, what needs to change if we are to speak words that build up rather than words that tear down?
9. What is one thing that you want to do this week as a result of having gone through this study? Be specific.



## Study 4 Wise plans

### Warm up

1. What is one decision that you are faced with at the moment? OR What plans do you have for the future?

### Bible-study and discussion

2. The sovereignty of God means three things:

(i) Ownership – everything has been made by God and belongs to him.

(ii) Authority – God has absolute right to impose his will on all his creatures. His commands are never arbitrary – they always reflect his holy and righteous character.

(iii) Control – God is master of his universe. At times he is displeased with it and at times angry, but nothing ever confuses or threatens him, or takes him by surprise.

God's sovereignty is seen throughout the book of Proverbs. What do the following verses tell us about the sovereignty of God?

Prov 8:15 and 21:1

Prov 3:19-20 and 30:4-5

Prov 5:21; 15:3; 16:4; 21:30-31

3. 'I am the master of my own fate: I am the captain of my soul', wrote William Henly in his poem "Invictus". Many people think this way. How do you respond and answer someone who holds to this kind of thinking?
4. Why is it so important to have a firm grasp of the sovereignty of God as we seek guidance and make plans for our life?
5. Some Christians use the phrase, 'Let go and let God'.
  - (a) Is this a helpful or unhelpful phrase when it comes to seeking guidance and making decisions?

(b) How do you make decisions and plan for the future as a Christian?

6. Read Proverbs 16:1-9 and 19:21.

(a) If the Lord 'works out everything for his own ends' (16:4) and 'it is his purpose that always prevails' (19:21), are we simply pawns being moved around at will on God's cosmic chessboard?

(b) Does Proverbs 16:3 describe your experience? Do the plans you commit to God always succeed? How are we to understand this verse?

(c) What comfort and assurance can we gain from these verses as we look to the future? Also consider Exodus 15:13; Jeremiah 29:11; Ephesians 2:4-10; Romans 8:28.

7. Read Proverbs 3:5-6.

(a) 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart': To 'trust' means to 'lean on', 'depend on', 'have confidence in'. How can we deepen our trust in God?

(b) '... lean not on your own understanding': What role do our thinking, reasoning and understanding play as we seek to determine future directions?

(c) 'In all your ways acknowledge him': In what areas of your life do you find it difficult to trust God rather than yourself?

(d) '... and he will make your paths straight': What does God promise us when we seek to obey his will and purposes in our life?

## Study 5 Wise relationships

### Warm up

1. What is one thing that is unique about your family?

### Bible study and discussion

2. Proverbs is often written from the perspective of a father addressing his son and offering wise counsel. Proverbs 1:8 and 6:20-22 tell us that both father and mother are to teach their children. Read Proverbs 2:1-8; 14:26; 22:4-6; 31:28-30.

What is the most valuable thing a parent can give to their child?

3. Read Deuteronomy 6:1-8. When parents 'listen', 'obey' and 'love', they provide a model for children that reinforces what is being said in the home. What does this passage teach us about raising children?

4. (a) What do the following verses have to say about disciplining a child?

Prov 3:11-12

13:24

19:18

23:13-14

29:15

(Note: The word 'rod' is almost certainly used here as a metaphor for any kind of discipline and correction. See Micah 5:1 for another example of this word being used as a metaphor.)

- (b) How do you think children should be disciplined when they are disobedient?

5. What do you think the Apostle Paul means when he tells fathers not to embitter or exasperate their children (Colossians 3:21; Ephesians 6:4)?
  
6. What do the following verses have to say about the relationship of a child to his/her parents?  
 Prov 13:1  
  
 Prov 17:6 & 25  
  
 Prov 19:26  
  
 Eph 6:1-3
  
7. What are some of the qualities of a wife of 'noble character' presented in Proverbs 31:10-31?
  
8. Some have jokingly suggested that Proverbs should have had a Chapter 32 outlining the characteristics of a godly husband. What makes a good husband? You might want to consult Ephesians 5:25-33.
  
9. The book of Proverbs has much to say about friendships.  
 (a) Why are we told to choose our friends carefully?  
 Prov 12:26  
  
 18:24  
  
 19:4 & 6  
  
 22:24  
  
 (b) What can we learn about being a friend from the example of Jesus? Consider John 15:13-15.  
  
  
  
  
  
 (c) 'As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another' (Proverbs 27:17). What does this proverb mean?

How can we apply this truth in practical ways to our friendships and in our Bible study groups?