

Fruitful Wisdom for the Perception of Life

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[0 : 00] Well that's all the notices. We come now to our Bible reading this morning and you'll find that in the book of Proverbs. That's on page 527, 527 of our Visitor's Bibles.

Willie is going to start a new short series on wisdom literature in the Bible. And this week we're going to be looking at the book of Proverbs. And we have a couple of readings to go through together. The first one will take place in chapter 1.

So Proverbs chapter 1 beginning at verse 1. Hear the word of the Lord. The Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.

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.

[1 : 08] To understand a proverb and a saying. The words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

Fools despise wisdom and instruction. Now please turn on to Proverbs chapter 10. You'll find that on page 533. And we have a number of readings from chapter 10.

Please look at verse 1. The Proverbs of Solomon. A wise son makes a glad father. But a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother.

Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit. But righteousness delivers from death. Now please look at verse 16. The wage of the righteous leads to life.

The gain of the wicked to sin. Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life. But he who rejects reproof leads others astray.

[2 : 16] The one who conceals hatred has lying lips. And whoever utters slander is a fool. When words are many, transgression is not lacking.

But whoever restrains his lips is prudent. The tongue of the righteous is choice silver. The heart of the wicked is of little worth.

The lips of the righteous feed many. But fools die for lack of sense. Now please look at verse 27. The fear of the Lord prolongs life.

But the years of the wicked will be short. The hope of the righteous brings joy. But the expectation of the wicked will perish. The way of the Lord is a stronghold to the blameless.

But destruction to evildoers. The righteous will never be removed. But the wicked will not dwell in the land. Well, amen.

[3 : 21] May God bless to us this, his word. I do have the outline sheet with you.

Can you hear me? I am switched on. You can hear me now. Good. And perhaps turn with me to the beginning of the book of Proverbs.

Lord, give us wisdom. We have such a lot of knowledge. But there's such a difference between knowledge and real wisdom.

And we need wisdom. Many of you will recognize that as a frequent prayer from our sister, Jo Skelton-Smith, at our church prayer meeting.

I think she prayed it just the very last time we met. And rightly so, because the Bible has so much to say about our need for wisdom. Just think of the Lord Jesus' own teaching about being wise for salvation.

[4 : 23] It's the faithful and wise servant, in Matthew chapter 24, who will be blessed and rewarded when the master returns. It's the wise virgins, not the foolish ones, who will be welcomed into the joy of the bridegroom when he returns.

It's the wise man who hears and does the words of Jesus, who alone will stand in the final judgment, not the fool who is built on the sand.

Wisdom is essential for salvation and for eternal life, according to Jesus. And it's essential for our maturity and for fruitful service for Christ now until that day.

Just read Paul's letters and you'll see. In Colossians chapter 1, verse 9, for example, Paul prays that the church will be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. So as they will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work. Wisdom is essential for faithful service to God.

[5 : 28] And that's the goal of all Paul's teaching, he says. In Colossians 1, verse 28, he's teaching everyone with all wisdom to present everyone mature in Christ.

Wisdom and maturity, you see, go together. And that is what leads to fruitfulness. And the context there, and in many other places, makes it very clear that such wisdom is far from being just an intellectual thing.

It's not just all about theology in your head. No, no, no. Wisdom is a relational thing. It involves the heart. Paul's struggle in ministry, he says, is that their hearts might be encouraged, knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance and understanding of the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden.

See, Christian wisdom and Christ wisdom is manifest and grows, he says, among a people who are knit together in love, who are encouraging one another in the knowledge of Christ.

As they put off all that is earthly in them, he says. What James would call the earthly wisdom that is from below, which destroys relationships with God and with each other.

[6 : 47] And put on, instead, the wisdom that comes from above, which breeds peace in relationships, not strife, which binds everyone together in harmony. So to be a mature, a fruitful fellowship like that, Paul says, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom.

How we need wisdom for salvation in Christ and for our service to Christ. But as Job says, well, where is wisdom to be found?

Well, if it is God's wisdom from above, then it must come from above. And it does, as Paul says, in all the scriptures, the sacred writings, he says, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

For salvation and for service, that you may be equipped for every good work. Now, we just spent a long time, haven't we, studying together the law of Moses.

And all of it's valuable teaching and correction and instruction for righteousness. And there's a great deal there to make us and help us be wise for salvation and for service in Christ.

[8 : 04] But there is also, of course, in the Bible, a large corpus of what we call the wisdom literature. These are the scriptural books that are very especially focused on the time of the kingship in Israel.

When the nation of Israel reached its zenith of maturity as a glorious kingdom of peace. The land was conquered. Enemies are subdued. An anointed son of God, a true king, is reigning on the throne.

And so God's land, God's kingdom, can become a place of flourishing wisdom. And God's law, as we've already seen in our studies in Deuteronomy, it was far from exhaustive.

It sets boundaries for thoughts, for actions. It sets trajectories for your thinking, to follow it, to go on obeying God gladly and comprehensively in life. So that indeed, if you live like that, as Moses said, you remember, that will be your wisdom in the sight of all the peoples.

God's people will be a kingdom of wise and glorious people, liberated to become more and more truly human. To be more and more imaging God here on earth, showing forth the wisdom of the only wise God.

[9 : 16] And under Solomon, you see, we get a glimpse of what that looks like. When wisdom is so great that it draws the eyes of all the world around. And all come to see that great light, the Queen of Sheba and all the rest.

And Solomon's great wisdom in all things, included wisdom of the natural world, the animal world, and so on. It takes us back, doesn't it, to the very first chapter of the Bible. Where Adam, God's first son before the fall, knows all these things, names all the animals, rules the world in great wisdom under God.

But of course, like Adam, who fell, Solomon too was just a man who fell. He was a great king. And the first ten chapters of First Kings describe the glory of his great kingdom.

But then comes an enormous but. And we begin to see Solomon's downfall. And yet the glory and the wisdom of his reign does foreshadow one who would be far greater than Solomon.

The Lord Jesus Christ, quite self-consciously, was happy to describe himself. One greater than Solomon is here. The king that Isaiah later on promised to chastened Israel in their exile.

[10 : 35] The one who would arise at last from the stump of Jesse. On whom would rest the spirit of the Lord, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.

Notice wisdom and the fear of the Lord together. And so in Solomon's kingdom, wisdom did flourish. And the people of God exhibited a maturity, an understanding that had been hitherto unknown.

And it was admired by all the world around. One writer points out something very significant. He says that it was with that coming of age, the freedom and the wisdom of the mature kingdom of Israel, that the kind of direct guidance from God that you saw from angels and dreams and so on, that used to mark the earlier periods of Israel's history, that that seems to die away.

And the chief counselors become the wise men who surround that supremely wise king. And they flourish with minds that are informed and renewed by God's great wisdom.

And it's a picture. It's a foreshadowing of God's ultimate purpose. A world of rightness where right relationships reign. Because people see all reality through the riches of the life of God made known.

[11 : 56] And the treasures of the wisdom and the knowledge of God revealed ultimately and fully in Christ. And so the more maturity and knowledge of God, the more wisdom.

And the less need for all that kind of guidance from outside. Because the more God's people are teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.

And that's how it should be, isn't it? In a mature church, according to Paul. Not a place where people are always rushing around seeking God's special guidance for this decision or that, or this thing or that.

Looking for signs or words or even putting out fleeces. Sometimes here Christians using that sort of silly language. As though what Gideon did putting his fleece out was even a sensible thing in Gideon's time.

God rebukes him for his lack of trust. No, no, no. When the word is dwelling richly among God's people, their wisdom is seen and known and understood among one another.

[12 : 57] So God's people are wise. Wise about all of life. Mature in their thinking. And then liberated to be fruitful, faithful, serving Christ in all sorts of different ways.

That's why God's prayer for the Colossian church was that they would get wisdom. He's echoing really the words of Proverbs 4 verse 5. Get wisdom. Get insight.

Do not forsake her and she will keep you. Love her and she will guard you. The beginning of wisdom is this. Get wisdom. And whatever you get, get insight.

In the very first few verses of Proverbs that we read in chapter 1, they're written, aren't they, to impart wisdom and instruction. About 15 different words for wisdom there. And verse 5, to obtain guidance.

Many Christians, many young Christians in particular, are often desperate, aren't they, for guidance and all sorts of specific things. But God's answer is to say, get wisdom about all of life.

[14 : 02] And then you'll find that that need for special crisis guidance, in fact, just ebbs away. As you're being transformed by the renewing of your mind for a life, live in all things, in the wisdom that comes from above.

One of the reasons I think that many Christians are finding it very difficult to be guided in life, have such problems in guidance, is that they've neglected not only the Old Testament in general, but the wisdom books in particular.

And so this little series over the next few weeks, what we're aiming to do is to stimulate our minds to delve into these rich books, which are written in a very particular way to make us wise.

Wise for salvation and wise for fruitful service in Christ. But here's a question. If Paul says, all treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Christ, then why should we as Christians need to go back to find wisdom in the Old Testament?

That's a fair question, I think, isn't it? Well, Jesus himself actually gives us the answer because he says, it is because these are the scriptures that bear witness about me.

[15 : 22] That is, these are the scriptures that expound Christ. And in particular, the wisdom books expound the unsearchable riches of the wisdom of God, which was fully manifest in man only in the person of Jesus Christ.

So if we want to know all about Christ's wisdom for all of life, then this is where we need to look in these scriptures. Because everything that they teach us of God's wisdom is what comes to its fulfillment in Christ.

That's why these books are still in our Bibles, haven't been cut out. That's why the apostles quote them so much in their New Testament teaching. There's more than 60 direct quotes from Proverbs in the epistles.

Think of Peter and James. They both quote Proverbs 3, 34, don't they? God gives grace to the humble but opposes the proud or the scoffer.

Or think of Hebrews 12 as it quotes Proverbs 3 about God's discipline in life, being hard but useful. Or Romans 12 and 20 where Paul quotes Proverbs 25, verse 21, about heaping burning coals on an enemy's head by showing him kindness.

[16 : 31] There's dozens and dozens of others when you think about it quoted in the New Testament. This is God's wisdom which is Christ's wisdom. Just think of all Jesus' parables.

The Greek word for parable is the translation of the Hebrew word proverb. Jesus taught in so many proverbs. So if we want great wisdom, if we want to get the wisdom God wants us to have, we need the wisdom of our great king, the Lord Jesus Christ, the wise king.

Because it was his spirit who gave wisdom to Solomon to teach and to write so much here for us.

To make us wise for salvation in Jesus Christ.

And indeed for all our service of Christ. So I want to give a taster just to whet your appetite to study these books of wisdom for yourself. They're not so much how-to books, but as one writer puts it, how-to-be books.

How-to-be wise. Proverbs is all about fruitful wisdom in the perception of life. And Job's all about fruitful wrestling in all the puzzles of life.

[17 : 41] Lamentations teaches us fruitful weeping in the pain of life. Song of Songs teaches about faithful wooing in the partnership in life, in marriage.

And of course, Ecclesiastes, as we studied some years ago, shows us how to fruitfully work despite all the perplexities of life that are all around us. How to live, how to lose, how to lament, how to love, and how to live with our limitations in this mortal world.

Vital things for us to know. So we're just going to spend one week having a bird's eye view of each of these books and to give some keys to help you read them.

So it's a different kind of study from normal. We're not going to be expounding these books in detail. But I hope it will help us get our Bibles open and get our minds thinking so that we can learn ourselves.

And in the time that we've got left this morning, I want to focus on a few things here that help us to approach the book of Proverbs. On page one of your sheet there, you've got an outline for what we're going to look at now.

[18 : 44] The back page gives you a little outline of the whole book of Proverbs, perhaps to help you as you read through it yourself later. But here is a real treasure trove for fruitful wisdom in our perception, our thinking and looking at the whole of life.

So a few words of general introduction to Proverbs and then some specific keys that I think we need to understand Proverbs properly. First of all, then, Proverbs is clearly written mainly as words from a father to a son.

A young man who's approaching adulthood and beginning to take his place in life as a leader, in marriage, in family life, perhaps in community life, and indeed if he is the king's son, then in national life and leadership.

But don't worry, ladies, that does not mean that there's nothing here for women or for girls. Don't panic. Chapter 1, verse 8, it's very clear, isn't it? It's a father and a mother who are teaching the young person here.

So clearly women are not excluded. If they're going to be teachers, then first of all, obviously, they've got to be learners. We read in chapter 10, verse 1, again, a father and a mother.

[19 : 54] The very last chapter of the book, it ends, doesn't it? In almost the very last verse, the book concluding with talking about the wisdom of the wife. We have the vehement teaching of the queen mother.

And then we have this virtuous example of the excellent wife. So don't worry, ladies, and even the feisty Meghan Markle can be reassured that the woman's voice is being heard in the book of Proverbs.

Second thing, it's very important that this parental wisdom can be trusted. That's the point, isn't it? It's not just what is spoken, but it is who is speaking that really matters.

That's why so many times in the first few chapters, the voice that you listen to is so important. Chapter 5, verse 1 to 3, my son, be attentive to my wisdom and not the lips of the forbidden woman. Her lips may drip with honey. They're smoother than oil. But in the end, those words will lead to death. Five times not to heed the voice of the adulteress.

[21 : 05] And chapter 9 concludes that introduction to the book with a stark choice between two women who personify either wisdom or folly. Lady wisdom, whose teaching will lead to life, and madam folly, although her words are loud and seductive, they are ultimately lethal.

So whose voice is heard and is heeded is a vital thing for God's people. That's something that's important all the way through the Bible. That's why the New Testament has such an emphasis, doesn't it, on identifying who are true teachers, who must be heeded, who must be obeyed. And false teachers, who must be resisted. If you don't know the difference between those two voices, you and the church will be destroyed. And so just like in Proverbs, all through the Bible, we will find it's the character of their lives that will give us a great clue about the corruption that comes from their lips.

So the voice is important. Third thing, of course, the nature of Proverbs is also important. And Proverbs are quite different from what we've been studying in the Law of Moses.

Once you get into the Proverbs proffer from chapter 12 onward, chapter 10 onwards, you'll see that they're not didactic commands to believe and obey. But they're rather shrewd observations about life, about creation, about human culture, about character.

[22 : 35] And their phrase serves to make you think. They talk about life's delights as well as life's dangers, the ordinary things and the odd things. And they're laid side by side, aren't they, in pithy sayings, in practical sayings, often provocative things.

So that they'll teach us by provoking us to be thoughtful about life. But always in the light of the wisdom that comes from our wise faith in God.

That's crucial. We'll come to that. So we mustn't take a proverb as if it was a command of Moses. It is just as authoritative, but in a very different kind of a way.

For one thing, proverbs tend to talk in generalities. That's the nature of them. So they tell us that sluggards don't prosper, nor do drunkards, nor do the hot-tempered, normally speaking.

We can always think of exceptions, can't we? Just like the person who lives to 110 having smoked 60 cigarettes a day. It doesn't mean, does it, it's wise to go and smoke 60 cigarettes a day.

[23 : 39] We all know that. And that doesn't invalidate the wisdom. So the maxims of proverbs are not absolutes. And, of course, the book itself recognizes that very clearly.

Chapter 26, verses 4 and 5 are a very good example where it puts two absolute opposites right together. And both can be true. Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him.

Next verse, answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes. In other words, with a fool, it's sometimes very hard to win. So we mustn't be wooden.

Proverbs are not laws, but they are instruction. They are Torah in that sense. They teach by making us think, as well as laugh, and often gasp, or even recoil in embarrassment as the message hits home.

25.14. Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of a gift he does not give. All talk of it just wind. Or 11.22.

[24 : 46] Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion. Don't go chasing a sizzler and find yourself stuck with a sow.

That's what it's saying. Because better to live on the corner of a roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife. That one comes twice, by the way.

21 verse 9 and 25 verse 24. So gents and ladies, take note twice. We have no time today to go into the details of the Proverbs.

That's for you to read. But I want to give a few key things to help us keep in mind a right approach here. Four key things which I think we need to unlock the teaching of this book as Christians today. We need to understand wisdom in relation to righteousness and revelation and relationships and finally resurrection. So first, real wisdom is about righteousness.

[25 : 51] Turn to chapter 10 that we read sections of earlier. We can see here something that is true all the way through the book. And that is that the wise person is the righteous one.

The person who relates rightly to God. And the fool is someone who is wicked because they relate wrongly and refuse God's truth. So verses 1 and 2.

A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother. Note father and mother. Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit, but righteousness delivers from death.

You see, that's true all through Proverbs. Repeatedly, the wise and the fool are the righteous and the wicked. And they're used interchangeably. So verse 21 here.

The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of sense. The opposite of righteous is the fool. And verse 27. The fear of the Lord prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be cut short.

[26 : 55] The opposite of wickedness is fear of the Lord. Note that to be righteous is to know the fear of the Lord. And notice verse 30. The very different final end of the righteous and the wicked.

Either dwelling always with God or being removed from God's presence. That's very important. We'll come back to that. You see, when we read of wisdom and folly, we're not talking about an intellectual thing.

It's not a matter of IQ. It's a spiritual thing. It's a right relationship with the Lord. That's real wisdom. That's righteousness. Or it's a wrong one.

That's wickedness. That's folly. That's so, so important because the nature of wisdom teaching is often indirectly moral and spiritual. Not direct as it is in the law of Moses.

It doesn't often command us not to sin, not to do this. What it does do, it shows us the consequences. Of sin and of folly.

[28 : 00] Because Proverbs, you see, focuses on the order in God's creation. And it shows us that sin is rebellion against God. And therefore, that is folly. It's something that's destructive.

It destroys humanity. It's really showing us what Paul speaks about in Romans chapter 1. That sin turns the truth of God into a lie.

And therefore, it makes your hearts foolish and darkened. And when you do that, you will pay the penalty in a disrupted life, in a disfigured life, ultimately in a destroyed life.

But to restore and to sustain right relationships requires wisdom. Whereas the fool, look here, brings about verse 6, violence.

And verse 12, strife. Verse 14, ruin. Verse 16, sin. And ultimately, verse 21, death. In the greatest folly, the book is teaching us is to be in the wrong with God.

[29 : 03] That is unrighteousness. That is wickedness. And in that way is disaster. Verse 28, the expectation of the wicked will perish. Wisdom, you see, understands that there's a created order and there's a moral order to life and to the world.

But the fool doesn't. So only the wise, only the one rightly related to God, the creator, can possibly understand the world and its order properly by observing it.

Because he knows that literally it speaks with one voice. It's a universe that we're observing. It's intelligible because it displays the wisdom of the creator. That's why our universities are called that, by the way.

They're set up to discover the universe, the one voice of the creator's intelligence in the world. It's ironic, isn't it, that so many academics today have no idea about that, deny that.

So for all our wisdom, the Bible calls them fools. But the creator God of all things is the covenant God of scripture.

[30 : 10] And so true knowledge of his creation, of all culture, of everything, it comes from a knowledge of him, a knowledge of the covenant God, the Lord.

And he can only be truly known through his self-revelation to us in his self-giving grace. And through a response to that grace in wholehearted trust.

Coming into a relationship of knowing him. Rightness with him. Righteousness. Wisdom. Being rightly related to God is to be able to rightly read the world.

Because that's where real wisdom begins. And that's the third thing you see. You can't possibly begin to understand the wisdom that we can see in the world without God's revelation.

Knowledge of the true God, knowledge of the covenant God, unlocks all the knowledge in the created order. And so we're told no less than 18 times all through this book that the fear of the Lord is the very beginning of wisdom.

[31 : 21] It's there at the very beginning of the introduction. We read it in chapter 1 verse 7. It's there at the end of the introduction, chapter 9 verse 10. It's the motto of my old university.

Initium sapienti timor domini. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It's there at the very end of the book, the second last verse. A woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

The very first step to being wise is fearing the Lord. Notice, not just fear of God. Not just the sort of general respect of some creator out there.

No, no, no. There are many God-fearing people in the world, aren't there? Following some kind of vague folk religion. That's not what this is saying. It's fear of the Lord. It's the God of the scriptures. The God with a name. The God who has drawn near to reveal himself in his gracious words and works. And calling forth from man a response of faith and of trust.

[32 : 21] A response that believes his promises and trusts him. And a response that believes his warnings. And so reverently fears him. Charles Bridges puts it this way.

Real fear of the Lord is that affectionate reverence by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his father's law.

In other words, it's humble, penitent faith, isn't it? And so another phrase that you find all through the Proverbs is steadfast love. Covenant love and faithfulness.

The obedience of faith that holds fast to the Lord, the covenant God. That's the key to wisdom in life. That's the key to all real life and to blessing in this world.

Wisdom, says 3 verse 18, is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her. The fear of the Lord, 14 verse 27, is the fountain of life.

[33 : 23] You see, the fear of the Lord, a response of faith to the revelation of God. That is the very beginning, the first step to wisdom in human life.

And in a very real sense also, it's the goal of wisdom too. Chapter 2 verses 1 to 6 speak about thirsting for wisdom and seeking after it. And that that in itself will lead to more knowledge of God.

Then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find true knowledge of God. So what does that mean for us? Is that just an Old Testament idea, this business of fearing the Lord?

No, no, no, no, no. Read Mary's song in Luke chapter 1, the Magnificat, where she proclaims about the coming Savior bringing God's mercy. She says, to all who fear him.

Peter's preaching the gospel to the Gentile Cornelius in Acts chapter 10. He says, fear God and do what is right. That's what it means to respond to the Lord Jesus Christ.

[34 : 27] In Revelation, the very last book of the New Testament, chapter 14 verse 7, the angel proclaims the eternal gospel. The eternal gospel. What is it?

Fear God and give him glory. Fear God and give him glory. Which means bowing down to the risen Lord Jesus Christ. So God's word is very plain.

If you want to be wise in life and wise for life, if you want to understand this whole world and everything the world can teach us, you won't be able to do that unless you begin by bowing humbly to the wisdom that is revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the king who is far, far greater than Solomon. And unless you do that, you can know vast amounts about the science of this world and know precisely nothing about the significance of this world.

Think of the intelligence and the knowledge of men like David Attenborough, or Richard Dawkins, or Stephen Hawking, and so many others like that. In the world's eyes, very, very wise men.

[35 : 35] Certainly huge intellects, huge knowledge, but in God's eyes, ultimately fools, because they reject God's wisdom.

Proverbs 8 verse 36, Whoever finds me, wisdom finds life. But whoever fails to find me, injures himself. And all who hate me, love death.

Hating God's wisdom is the kiss of death. They're solemn words, aren't they? Because real wisdom is about righteousness. And righteousness is all about a right response to God's revelation.

And so third, it shouldn't surprise us, should it, that real wisdom is also all about relationships. The vast bulk of the Proverbs are all about wisdom that nurtures and cherishes right relationships.

And about the folly that spoils and destroys relationships. Well, relationships are at the very heart of human life here on earth, aren't they? We know that. And relationships surely are among our

greatest sources of joy in this life and our greatest source of sorrow in life when those relationships end, especially in death that so grieves us.

[36 : 59] Or when relationships are lost through our folly, our bad behavior, our foolishness. That's because, of course, relationships are what human beings are made for.

Above all, to relate to God himself, who made us to relate to him. He is the speaking God who spoke us into creation and wants us to speak back to him, to respond to the God who reveals himself.

And the wise person is the person who creates and who sustains and who cherishes relationships in life and who finds joy in them. Or the fool is the one who disdains and destroys them and in so doing damages and diminishes himself and his own life.

And again, it's not, it's not principally an intellectual wisdom, that, is it? Some of the most intellectually endowed people in the world are the most incapable of sustaining rich and real relationships.

Think of the brilliant professor who plows his way through five marriages. Or the brilliant doctor who can run a whole hospital but has absolutely no relationship anymore with his children because he's wrecked his marriage and destroyed his relationships.

[38 : 18] Or the super brainy graduates who can do endless math problems but have absolutely no idea how to manage a household and their children. Well, you see, the Proverbs are here to help us with relational wisdom.

How to be wise and not foolish in relating to our friends and our neighbors and our spouses and our bosses and our rulers and to animals and nature and the whole world and to ourselves and our own temptations.

It's a book full of relational realism. So, for example, two key themes that are there in the first nine chapters of the Father's warnings to his sons are all about the things that will easily wreck the relationships in a young man's life.

They deal with the young man's propensity to violence, the lure of the gang in chapter one, and with the young man's virility, which is why there's five times a warning against forbidden and illicit sexual unions.

If you're not wise in those areas when you're a young man, there will be instability and loss almost certainly all through your life. And again, so many Proverbs focus on the tongue, don't they?

[39 : 31] And on speech because it's words that either build or break and blight relationships.

Proverbs full of things about words. 15 verse 1, a soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs it up.

Isn't that true? And verse 2, the tongues of the wise commend knowledge, but the mouth of fools pour out folly. Or 18:21, death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.

Watch your tongue. And in our day, I suppose, watch your tweets too. Some people need to listen to that very carefully. But you see, we need to be careful, don't we?

Reckless words. Pierced like a sword, says chapter 12, verse 18. But the tongue of the wise brings healing. It's all about relationships, isn't it?

And there are many, many more like that. In fact, chapters 25 to 29, you'll see how particular clusters all about relationships with neighbors, with fools, with spouses, with kings, full of wisdom to sustain and strengthen relationships and not harm them.

[40 : 46] I love 25, verse 17. Let your foot seldom be in your neighbor's house, lest he have his fill of you and hate you. Sometimes less is more in relationships. Isn't that right?

But not everybody gets that. So much about relationships. Because that's what righteousness is all about. Right relationships. Right relationships here on earth that reflect the right relationships in God's heavenly kingdom.

Not the wrong relationships of the devil's hellish dwelling place. Read chapter 3 of James' letter later on this afternoon. Earthly wisdom, he says.

Relationships full of bitter jealousy, selfish ambition and boasting. That's demonic. But the wisdom that is from above, he says, is first of all pure and then peaceable and gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. That's right out of Proverbs. James loves Proverbs. He's always quoting Proverbs.

[41 : 56] But that's what life is all about ultimately. Righteousness. Right relationships on earth and in heaven. And real wisdom consists in finding these and never losing them.

Not ever. And that brings us to the final key here that we need to understand this book because you see, real wisdom can't be understood without grasping the reality of resurrection.

This is perhaps the most important key of all because it can seem to us as though the book of Proverbs is promising something more than is real. Something that just doesn't equate to real life.

So 21 verse 21, whoever pursues righteousness and kindness will find life and righteousness and honor. Or 22 verse 4, the reward for humility and the fear of the Lord is riches and honor and life.

Now that just seems over the top. And it seems hard to equate, doesn't it, with Jesus' teaching that the way of faith is hard, that it involves self-denial, that it involves cross-bearing.

[43 : 04] Is the gospel of Proverbs different? Is it a prosperity gospel? Now that's to misunderstand Proverbs. If you read carefully you'll see many Proverbs are well aware that the wicked seem to prosper.

We read it in chapter 10 verse 2, treasures gained by wickedness. And it's aware of the privations of the godly. It talks about God's discipline for one thing being unpleasant in the present time.

So what does it mean in Proverbs this repeated maxim that life, life is the reward of the righteous and death is the lot of the wicked?

Well we need to understand what that life really means. And in nearly all of its uses in Proverbs it clearly means something more than just mere physical life, clinical earthly life.

Wisdom is the tree of life and that signifies the life of God himself. In chapter 8 verse 35 life and the favor of the Lord are one and the same thing.

[44 : 06] In chapter 12 verse 28 we're told the path of the righteous is life and in that pathway is no death. No death. So as somebody has put it life is abundant life in fellowship with God.

A living relationship with God that is never envisaged as ending. As eternal death is contrasted for the wicked.

wicked. The righteous will inhabit the land but the wicked will be cut off from it. Chapter 2 verse 21. So when you read about length of days and long life that wisdom promises is her reward it doesn't mean necessarily a long earthly life.

It means a never ending life never cut off from the presence of the Lord forever and ever. That's how it's used so many times in the Bible. In Isaiah chapter 53 one great example where Isaiah speaks of the servant of the Lord's life being cut off as a sin offering and after that he will endure length of days long life after death.

[45 : 21] It's there in the very last verse of the famous Psalm 23 I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever for length of days for long life. Or in Psalm 21 verse 4 where David says he asked life of you and you gave it to him length of days forever and ever.

So you see life and death all through these wisdom books means ultimate life and ultimate death. Life with God and life excluded from God.

Life lived in God's presence now and always is what life is. But not so for the wicked. wicked. The wicked has a very different latter end or future.

And again that's a phrase all through Proverbs translated differently. Let's just look as we close at one place that makes that so clear. Chapter 24 and verse 14. Page 546.

Proverbs 24 14. If you find wisdom there will be a future and your hope will not be cut off. No end of life in God's presence for the wise.

[46 : 35] Contrast verse 20. For the evil man has no future. The lamp of the wicked will be put out. And so you see the previous verse, verse 19.

Fret not because of evildoers. Don't be envious of the wicked. For the evil man has no future. His lamp will be put out.

See the end. See the future. Just like Psalm 73 where the psalmist is agonized because the wicked seem to be prospering and the godly are always perishing until he went into the sanctuary, the place of revelation, and I discerned their end, their future.

And that's all the way through the book of Proverbs. Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit in the end, but righteousness delivers from death.

The wicked is overthrown by his evil doing, but the righteous finds refuge in his death. 14 verse 32. Mortal life will end for both, for everybody, but for the wise, the Proverbs writer tells us, death is not our ruin, but our refuge.

[47 : 53] God because it's the gateway to everlasting life in the presence of God. And so as chapter 3 verse 5 says, we can trust God with all our heart.

We don't need to be perturbed when mere earthly insight would suggest a very different way. No, in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your path straight because it is the path of unending life with him forever and never.

That's the promise of Proverbs. That's the promise of the wisdom of Solomon. How much more in our better and clearer and richer promises from the one greater than Solomon, the Lord Jesus Christ, who has already arisen never to die again.

how much greater our assurance in Jesus, our Savior, in whom are hidden all treasures of wisdom and knowledge. But he's given us this book and these others to make us wise and fruitful in our perception of life if we will see it in the light of his revelation and of his ultimate glory and grace. So let's get wisdom and let's share wisdom. Let's walk in a manner worthy of our great and wise king, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[49 : 20] Let's pray. The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits.

impartial and sincere. Lord, grant us, we pray, your wisdom that, as the apostle Paul says, in malice we may be but infants, but in understanding, in wisdom, mature, true men and women of God in Christ for his great glory's sake.

Amen. Amen.