

The Beginning of Wisdom

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[0 : 0 0] I got a book for Christmas this year by John Grisham, one of those kind of novels. It said this on the dust jacket, what the book's all about. It said this, I'm not a typical lawyer. I don't maintain a pretty office.

I don't belong to a big firm. I'm a lone gunman, a rogue who fights bad systems and hates injustice. Well, that sounds cool, doesn't it? That is definitely a book I will be reading, even though my dad did admit that he got it from a charity shop for a pound and had already read it himself.

And so it's kind of third hand, but it looks good. That is a book I'll be reading. If I'd picked it up and read it and it said, I am a typical lawyer. I work in an office and process planning applications.

You know, I'd have probably said, actually, I'm not sure if that's the book for me. We can learn a lot about a book by its cover, by kind of the blurb that tells us what it is all about.

In the book of Proverbs, we don't turn to the back cover or to the dust jacket to find that description, that blurb. Instead, these opening seven verses tell us what this book is all about.

[1 : 0 4] They tell us what it's for. They tell us who it's for. And importantly, they give us the key in making sense of it all. And so that's what we're going to be looking at this morning, really laying down the foundations of what's to come, showing us how we should be approaching this book, wetting our appetites to want to hear more from the book of Proverbs over the next couple of months.

And so that's the plan in our time together this morning as we start in this new book, a book which I think is so often overlooked in the church, and yet a book which I think is incredibly relevant and incredibly timely and incredibly helpful for the day and age that we live in.

So first up then, what is this book for? Why is it that we're going to spend time looking in this book together? What can we hope to get from it? What difference is it going to make? Let me read again the first three verses, which will help us answer that question.

Have a look there if you've got your Bibles. It says this, 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.

Straight away, we're told that this book comes from Solomon, son of David, king of Israel. Why does that matter? Why are we interested in that? Well, elsewhere, we're told in the Bible that Solomon was the wisest king, probably the wisest person who ever lived.

[2 : 3 5] It says God gave Solomon wisdom, exceedingly deep insight, and understanding beyond measure like the sand on the seashore. Solomon was an incredibly wise and intelligent person.

And what is the purpose then of this book? What is it for, verse 2? Well, we read straight away. It's to know wisdom. The whole book of Proverbs is about wisdom.

That is what we're going to get from this book of Proverbs, wisdom. This book is here to make us wise, that we would be wise as a church, that we would be wise as individuals.

And so we're off to a good start. We're going to learn wisdom from the wisest guy who ever lived. And we have got a good teacher here. We've got an author that we can trust. Growing up, I had a book.

It was called Ryan Giggs's Soccer Skills. And I knew that was a book that was worth reading because although Ryan Giggs wasn't a great author, he had some good soccer skills. It was worth looking at so that I could reach not quite his level, but I was kind of almost there.

[3 : 38] Well, here we have this man who God has given understanding beyond measure like the sand on the seashore looking to pass on this wisdom, God's wisdom, to those who listen.

So this is a book all about wisdom, but actually what is wisdom in the Bible? Well, a quick kind of introduction here to how Hebrew poetic writing, which is what a lot of Proverbs is, how it often works, just in case that doesn't feature heavily in your bedtime reading.

But this kind of Hebrew poetic genre often uses something called parallelism. It's something we see a lot in the Psalms. It's something we're going to see a lot of throughout the book of Proverbs.

If you have a look there at verse 2, if you've got your Bible in front of you, you'll see it's split over two lines. The first line, to know wisdom and instruction, break, to understand words of insight.

We say that those two lines are in parallel. It means they're not both saying different things, but they're both saying the same thing in two different ways.

[4 : 46] They're shedding light on the same truth from different angles. So what does it mean to know wisdom and instruction? Well, it means to understand words of insight. And we see the same, and perhaps this is actually a bit more helpful in verse 3.

What are these wise dealings that we receive instruction in? Well, it's there in that parallel line. It's this righteousness, justice, and equity that that second line speaks about.

So I wanted to kind of highlight that parallelism right at the start, because as I say, we'll see it a lot in Proverbs. It works in different ways. But we see that right here, in these opening verses, it shows us that, biblically speaking, wisdom is big.

That the scope of this wisdom is vast. It's to do with insight. It's to do with righteousness. It's to do with justice. It's to do with equity. Wisdom in the Bible is this kind of all-encompassing category.

It's both a moral thing, choosing the right from wrong, and it's also a practical thing, putting those choices into action. That is the kind of wisdom that we're wanting to learn about from this book.

[5 : 55] And it's not so much the information that we know, but rather how we put that into practice, how we live. Brian O'Driscoll, the rugby player, once came out with this gem in a press conference.

He said, knowledge is knowing that tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is knowing not to put it in a fruit salad. That's not straight from King Solomon, but actually that's not a bad description from Brian O'Driscoll of biblical wisdom.

Wisdom is taking what we know, it is taking what is true, and then using that knowledge in the right way to reach the right ends. And so as we look through this book, to know wisdom, to get wise, that does not mean that by the end of it, we'll all just be kind of sitting back in our chairs, stroking our chins and aimlessly speculating about abstract concepts.

No, if we get biblical wisdom, it will mean that we are people who are actively, people. It will mean that we are people who are engaged in the world around us in all sorts of different ways, and who, this is the key, who are generally able to make good decisions, good choices in our relationships, with our money, in our families, in how we speak to one another, in how we spend our time.

Wisdom is there to help us chart a good path through the many potentially confusing aspects of life. I'm a, surprise some of you, but I'm a little bit of a nerd, and I quite enjoy looking at kind of graphs and, you know, kind of visual kind of things like that.

[7 : 30] I say enjoy is a strong word. I like that kind of thing. I like a good kind of flow chart. You've seen those, haven't you? You have the question, and it has simple kind of yes or no answers, leads you to another question, yes or no, and you just kind of follow this path down until eventually it tells you this is what you should do, or this is the type of person that you are.

And yet we realize actually in real life things are not that simple, are they? We cannot live our day-to-day life on the basis of flow charts that will constantly give us yes or no options for every potential scenario that we arrive at.

Some things are very black and white, but many things are not so simple. What job should I take? Should I marry this person or not? Where should I live? How should we get?

What should I say to this person in the midst of this incredibly complex situation? It's in these kind of things, and I'm sure as I mentioned those, you could probably list a hundred more things in your head, tricky situations, things perhaps you're in the midst of right now where we think, hang on a minute, the Bible does not directly prescribe an answer to this.

There is no verse that tells me whether to buy this house or that house. These situations where we're looking to choose what is best. Sometimes it almost seems like we're looking to choose what is the least worst option.

[8 : 53] In situations like these, the Bible's teaching is not to wait or expect a voice from the sky that will describe each step forward. The Bible's teaching is to seek to grow in wisdom.

As we see in the book of Proverbs, to receive instruction in wise dealing, to conform our thinking, our minds to what God has revealed in his word, the Bible, as to how the world he created works best.

And so that, with that wisdom, that our prayerful and our carefully considered decisions would be wise decisions, would work with the grain of what God is doing in his universe, would work in line with what he would have us do.

Now that is what the book of Proverbs is going to help us to do. As we gather together as God's people, it's going to help us to know wisdom. A writer called Ray Altland said this about the importance of wisdom.

I found this so helpful as we dig into this book together. It's only if we have wisdom that we're able to do all these other things well.

[10 : 20] Wisdom is this kind of all-encompassing category that enables us to use our various different gifts, to follow our various different callings, to live our very different lives in ways that honors God, that builds people up, that helps people, that makes the world around us a better place, that shows a discernment which is so often lacking in our society.

And as we do that, it then gives us the chance to point people to God, to say actually this is his wisdom revealed through his word, the Bible.

So there we go. This is a book all about wisdom, and that wisdom is a big thing. It's this holistic, active, real-world thing that shapes how we live in every area of life.

It helps us, as it were, kind of cut with the grain of God's creation. So that is what the book is for. The second question, this blurb, this introduction, answers for us not just what the book is for, but who is this book for?

And the answer here is quite straightforward. If we pick up reading after we left off in verse 3, well, verse 4, 5, and 6 say this. To give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth.

[11 : 35] 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. So who is this wisdom for?

Who is it offered to? Who is this book for? Verse 4 says it's for the simple, and it's for the youth. And again, I think those terms are held there kind of in parallel. We don't have to kind of take too much time trying to distinguish between them.

Really, it's speaking about those who still have a lot to learn. And so a lot of this book is set out in the language of a parent teaching a child. You'll see that in verse 8, just below the section we're looking at this week.

Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching. That's a book for the youth and for the simple. It's to set people going in the right direction.

And yet before any of us start thinking, well, actually, I know quite a lot. I'm not just starting out. I've been around the block a few times. What about me? Well, let's carry on into verse 5.

[12 : 37] And it says this, let the wise hear and increase in understanding. Let the one who understands obtain guidance to understand a proverb. And so this is a book for the wise as well.

This is also a book for the one who understands. This is not a beginner's guide. Rather, Proverbs offers a kind of an all-encompassing guidance for life and how it works best at every stage that we never exhaust.

And really, I think this is incredible. It shows us something which is a key biblical truth. And that's this, that the Bible, Christianity, that the gospel, it is not for people who have got it all sorted.

The Bible or the church does not say, if you know how to live well, if you know how to behave, well, then come on in and join us. No, it says you might be confused about life.

You might be heading down the wrong track. You might not know where you're heading. But you are invited in to come and listen to God's wisdom. You are invited to come and hear God's word.

[13 : 42] Which does not promise simple answers to everything. But which actually gives a framework to make sense of our world. I'm entirely convinced that the Bible's way of looking at the world makes more sense than any other.

And we shouldn't be surprised at that. Because the Bible is written, the wisdom of the Bible is from the one who made this world. That invitation to come and hear is an invitation to come and look at the world through its creator's eyes.

Perhaps that's you this morning. You might be simple. That sounds slightly insulting, doesn't it? That's not the way the word, it's not the way the Bible uses the word. But really, when it talks about simple, it means more being kind of on the fence or just starting out.

A blank page, we might say. Later on in Proverbs, wisdom will call out to the simple. And folly, foolishness, will also call out to the simple. And the question is not so much where are you now, but which of these paths, which of these voices will you choose to listen to?

Perhaps you're a youth. Guys here who are still at school making big decisions about life, still shaping how you approach the world.

[14 : 58] The Bible says come and listen to what God says. God longs to teach you about his world. God longs from the earliest stages to try and help you make sense of this confusing world that we grow up in.

I think as well you can be a youth in this sense of the world, while still kind of getting on in calendar years, we might say. But still thinking about these big questions, still trying to make sense of the world.

The book of Proverbs, the Bible, the gospel as a whole, we hear as a church. It never sends the youth away to say, well, make your mind up. Well, if you choose wisely, if you choose wisdom, you can come back and then come in.

No, the Bible is a message to make people wise. It is for the simple. It is for the youth. It is for those who are still asking those big questions.

It holds out this offer of understanding. But also, as we said, it's for the wise as well. Let the wise hear an increase in learning. No one in this church, no one in this world has got it all sorted.

[16 : 02] God continues to offer wisdom for us to develop all the days of our life. And one of the key points that Proverbs will keep on coming back to is that the wise person is someone who keeps on learning, while the fool continues to hate wisdom, to hate being taught, to refuse to listen.

Chapter 4, verse 7, it says this, the beginning of wisdom is this, get wisdom. You kind of read that and you think, well, that's not very helpful, is it? It sounds like a bit of a circular argument. But the point is this, that wisdom isn't so much defined by what you know.

It's the awareness almost that there is so much more to learn. The wise person does not look at the book of Proverbs and say, oh, yeah, I've been there, done that, read that before. No, they look at the book of Proverbs.

They look at the Bible as a whole. They look at their life as a Christian and say, I need to know more. I want more of that. I need to grow in wisdom. There are still so many areas of my life where I need to conform more to God's plan, to God's design, to God's wisdom.

Hopefully the book of Proverbs will be a great eye-opener for those of us who might have grown stale in our faith, might have started to slip into that temptation to think, yeah, I've kind of reached where I want to go and I'm happy here.

[17 : 22] I'm a good person. I know all I need to know. And the book of Proverbs says that is not the attitude of the wise person. The wise person is constantly growing in wisdom.

And it says, and this, God's word, is where we can find that. And so Proverbs is a great book for us as we talk as a church about being a growing community. As we use that language, not just in terms of getting more people in through the door, but all of us growing in our relationship with God.

Growing in the love and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. If we want to grow, the book of Proverbs invites us in to listen to wisdom and to grow in wisdom.

Wherever we might be initially on that journey, whatever our starting point might be, that encouragement to get wisdom. And for that wisdom in turn to spur us on to seek more wisdom.

More of this intensely practical, intensely attractive, intensely godly understanding of how we approach our lives. So what is the book for? It's so that we can know wisdom.

[18 : 28] Who is it for? It's for all of us, from the youngest to the oldest. From those with uncertainty and questions about God. To those who have walked with him for a long time. It's from the simple to the wise.

The final question then, and really the key that this introduction shows us, is where does this all start? Where does this wisdom come from? What is the key that is going to unlock the rest of this book and make it make sense?

And we see it there in verse 7, our final verse. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Where does this knowledge and wisdom, which the whole of Proverbs is directing us towards, come from? Well, this introduction tells us it comes from the fear of the Lord.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. And this phrase, the fear of the Lord, is one that we'll see time and time again in Proverbs. It's a key term, actually, in all of the Bible's wisdom books.

[19 : 31] If you were to read Ecclesiastes, you get to the very end. And the writer says, this is the sum of all things, the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep his commandments. The book of Proverbs kind of works the other way around.

It gives us that key right at the beginning. This is the key to wisdom, fear God. And then it's going to kind of work out what that looks like after that. This key term, fear, the fear of the Lord.

So what does it really mean? Well, above all, to fear God means this. It means to truly recognize who he is and to see ourselves in light of that.

To truly recognize who he is and see ourselves in light of that. It is having a right understanding of God and a right response to that.

And that can be a really challenging thing. It's really easy for me to stand here and say, well, you know, the fear of the Lord doesn't mean to be scared of God. It's not that kind of fear. And yet, actually, in some ways, that is part of it.

[20 : 34] Because the recognition, the fear of the Lord is the recognition that God is holy and pure. That God hates sin and all that is wrong with the world that he created.

All that has been brought in that is not of him. And yet, also, the fear of the Lord recognizes that in light of that God, well, I am not a holy person. It sees that within me lies that sin that God is angry at.

That I cannot just kind of stroll up to God and expect everything to be fine. That in my kind of default state, God and I are not on good terms. That is an element of this fear of God.

He is holy, a consuming fire. I am deeply flawed and have rebelled against him. And yet, while we so often run away from what we fear, the fear of the Lord instead draws us in.

It is that right recognition of God which says that although he is here and I am there, that he is so perfect, that he is so wonderful, that he is so much the source of every good thing, that somehow I need to be with him, that I need to get to where he is.

[21 : 49] And so, ultimately, it is the fear of the Lord that drives us to Jesus. The fear of the Lord drives us to the gospel, the way that God has made it possible for us to be with him.

It humbles us. It makes us confess all the many, many ways that we fall short. And when we confess our sin, God is faithful to forgive.

God welcomes us home. It is this fear of the Lord that causes us to put our trust not in our own efforts, as we see how far short they fall, but rather put our trust in Jesus and him alone to be reconciled to God.

The fear of the Lord drives us to Jesus. And yet, for those of us who have trusted in Jesus, biblically speaking, that fear of the Lord is not extinguished.

We're still called to live our Christian lives in the fear of the Lord. And not the fear of judgment or punishment. If we trust in Jesus, that is dealt with.

[22 : 48] But rather to have that fear of God in terms of truly recognizing who he is and remembering our place under that. Not being casual or careless with God.

He is the Lord. We are his people. He is the creator. We are his creation. He is holy. We are sinful. He is the savior. We are the ones constantly in need of his mercy, grace, and compassion that we receive in the gospel.

I said earlier on that Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived. That's not actually true because when Jesus arrives, he says, speaking about himself, he said, one greater than Solomon is here.

Ultimately, Jesus is the wisdom of God. He is the only one that can make life truly make sense. It is that fear of the Lord that drives us to Jesus and then constantly reminds us of our need for Jesus.

Constantly reminds us that we live our lives in light of who God is and all that he's done for us through Jesus. That is the fear of the Lord that Proverbs begins with, that is the key to understanding that book, the beginning of wisdom.

[23 : 59] And so Proverbs is going to go on and cover all sorts of areas like relationships, money, speech, time, all sorts of things where, as we said before, it is not black and white, where life is confusing. Proverbs is going to show us in really practical ways what living well in the world looks like.

But these things, this book will only make sense if we have that foundation of the fear of the Lord in place. If we have this right understanding and relationship with God laid down, first of all, as the bedrock and that everything we do is living in response to that.

The Bible often speaks about the fear of the Lord and contrasts that with the fear of man. It says, who are you going to fear? You know, the question is, who are you ultimately living to please?

Whose opinion truly matters to you? Whose approval do you seek after more than anything else? And Proverbs here is saying, it's only when God is the answer to that question that we can learn how to live well, that we can be wise.

If we don't fear God, but instead fear man, if we're desperately trying to please everyone all the time, if we're desperate to be thought well of by various different people who all have different ideas of what we should be doing, if we don't have God in that picture and that foundation of a relationship with him, then living trying to please man is an exhausting way to live.

[25 : 23] It is a way that does not lead to wisdom, does not promote wise decisions, but leaves us chasing after various different things that different people might say. But it is only the fear of the Lord, the right understanding and prioritizing of him, the unchanging God, the God of all creation, that is only living in light of who he is that enables us to make wise choices.

That is the key to wisdom. Proverbs is not a book of tips and tricks. Proverbs is not a random collection of various sort of do's and don'ts.

Proverbs is a book about God. And that is why it is in the Bible and that is why we're going to spend our time looking through it. It's a book about knowing him, about submitting to him, about following him, about seeking him, and how that helps us live well in every area of life in his creation.

If we want to live well in the world, we first need to know the one who created it. And it's when we have him in mind, it's when we have that fear of the Lord, that recognition of who he is, that recognition of what he's done, when we have that always before us, always at the front of our mind, always as our guide and controlling thought.

That is the foundation. That is the beginning of wisdom. That is the only way we'll be able to live well for his glory and live well in his world. Let's pray together. Let's pray together.