

## Proverbs

The first thing I would like to say is that this book in a book covering the Book of Proverbs in the Bible, to precede the book that is to follow, on the Book of Ecclesiastes, following a similar pattern to that adopted for the previous book in the trilogy, that concerning the Song of Songs, and there are some things worth saying that are more or less applicable to each book. But Song of Songs got in first – fifty years earlier in fact. I neither wish to be repetitive, nor do I propose to radically edit what I previously wrote in order to provide a slick generic introduction covering all three books. I therefore beg the reader's indulgence for taking this approach, which is more about building on what went on previously, cutting to the chase and preparing needed ground work for what is by far the major part of what is being written about for each of the three books – thirty-one daily meditations, one for each day of the month. One more thing, when it comes to providing daily reflections on Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, I will apply one item of wisdom learned and use the third person – as it is *not* about me!

### Introducing Proverbs

Regarding authorship, we are left in no doubt, because right at the outset we read: “*The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel*” (1:1). While not disputing whether or not Solomon wrote Proverbs (970 to 930 BC), it is a nevertheless more complex than that. Some, maybe most, of the proverbs were known before Solomon, and Solomon merely did a sifting job to make these available to those who would read them later. Some proverbs are referred to as the sayings of the wise (22-24). Not known, but it would be interesting to know how many of “*three thousand proverbs*” 1 Kings 4:32 Solomon wrote ended up in the Book of Proverbs. Some 350 years later, in the reign of King Hezekiah (715 to 686 BC), others did further editing and compiling, perhaps removing some of the inevitable repetition Solomon had introduced in order to make what we now see set before us all the more readable. Some, maybe many, proverbs were known already in the ancient world and originated by those outside of Israel, e.g. Egypt, including followers of gods, other than YHWH. It is perhaps a good example of common grace, and wisdom coming from unlikely sources. One may infer that part of Solomon's wisdom was to recognise wisdom in others. We know of two named persons who contributed: Agur and Lemuel.

We also read from the outset the purpose of writing: “*To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding; To receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity; To give subtilty to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion. A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels:*

*To understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings” (1:2-6).* To complete the prologue, it is worth mentioning a statement that is central to the whole book, in that it introduces two themes repeatedly referred to: wisdom is better than foolishness and that of the fear of the Lord: *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (1:7).* As for the way the book pans out, most would broadly agree with the following headings (as set out in my NIV Study Bible):

1. Prologue: Purpose and Theme (1:1–7)
2. The Superiority of the Way of Wisdom (1:8–9:18)
  - Appeals and Warnings Confronting Youth (1:8–33)
  - Commendation of Wisdom (chs. 2–4)
  - Warnings against Folly (chs. 5–7)
  - Appeals Addressed to Youth (chs. 8–9)
3. The Main Collection of Solomon’s Proverbs (10:1–22:16)
4. The Thirty Sayings of the Wise (22:17–24:22)
5. Additional Sayings of the Wise (24:23–34)
6. Hezekiah’s Collection of Solomon’s Proverbs (chs. 25–29)
7. The Sayings of Agur (ch. 30)
8. The Sayings of King Lemuel (31:1–9)
9. Epilogue: The Ideal Wife (31:10–31)

A lot of the Book of Proverbs is pretty down to earth and, as one friend said, “downright obvious”. It covers all sorts of subjects, often very practical and matter of fact, and is good sound common-sense advice to help us on our way. Refreshingly, while God features big time, it is *not* religious and covers all sorts of topics that could raise the eyebrows of those who are. It can be seen as advice parents (both father and mother) would want their sons to heed, which given universal experience does not always happen as lessons have to be learned from the mistakes of not taking heed to what we are taught. Proverbs was directed at men rather than women, because men were looked upon as the one taking the lead, including in the family, although what is advised applies to us all, even three thousand years later with all the cultural differences we can now see.

Interestingly, sayings from the Proverbs are not just often quoted in the NT but many find themselves being referred to in everyday life. My own experience as a preacher and hearer of many sermons is, unlike Song of Songs, Proverbs do not usually feature in the main text but is often referred to. Not only that, but in real life application also, including what people write on social media, some who will be unaware they are quoting from the Bible. The English translators of Proverbs have done a creditable job given the limitations of translating breath-

taking Hebrew poetry in a form that modern readers can easily remember. My preference for the King James Version (KJV), evidenced when we talked about the Song of Songs, continues with Proverbs, but with a caveat. While the words of the KJV are invariably lovely, they do not always do justice to giving the real meaning of the text. Not that it is the definitive solution, but I found often going from the sublime to the ridiculous helped. By that, I mean using The Message (MSG) version alongside the KJV, as an approach to understanding the text.

When I wrote on the Song of Songs, it was a no brainer to dedicate this to my wife. Similarly, I would want to dedicate this book to my son, Matthew. I hope and pray he follows the wisdom set out in Proverbs, but as Solomon found out with his son, Rehoboam, there is no guarantee that it will be so, as each new generation needs to make up their mind whether they follow the way of wisdom or the way of foolishness. With this in mind, I would want to include the next generation, who because of a decline in the culture and turning away from God, are less likely to be told about the Way of Wisdom, and in a small way these thoughts on the Book of Proverbs is my contribution to redressing the balance.

### **Approaching Proverbs**

Coming up with thirty-one daily meditations on Proverbs is both a convenient and an inconvenient undertaking. It is convenient because, at least for seven months of the year, there are thirty-one days in the month and it readily lends itself to covering a chapter for each day, and may well encourage some readers to read through the thirty-one chapters, in Proverbs, one for each day in that month. It is inconvenient because many chapters contain miscellaneous nuggets of gold on a vast array of subjects, which one commentator compared to hundreds of fortune cookies where the one that follows is often to do with an entirely different subject to the one before. If the idea is to provide a concise thought for the day that covers the whole chapter, it is well-nigh impossible to do justice to everything given the vast range of subjects begging to be covered.

Given Solomon wrote 3000 proverbs, which experts reckon around 500 are included within the Book of Proverbs, a better approach perhaps may be to write 365 (or 366) “thoughts for the day”, i.e. a whole year’s worth. By way of compromise, I have taken note of the main themes of Proverbs, such as those identified in the previous and next section, noting Solomon repeatedly returns to some of the same themes. As an approach, I have selected my texts with the view to covering the main themes and linking related texts, albeit not entirely successfully, for many nuggets will be missed and my choices will inevitably reflect my own interests. I do try, though, to cross relate each day’s text, usually one but sometimes more verses, to other texts to do with the same theme. I

envisage readers of each day's reflection to read the whole chapter and even though I will unavoidably leave out many gems in order to focus on the text for that day in one page, I often try to acknowledge the riches I do not explore.

The first nine chapters broadly covers certain major themes, often to do with the desirability of following the way of wisdom and the undesirability of following the way of foolishness, and there is a degree of repetition as well as urgency in the warnings, as the author returns to his main theme of going after wisdom and preoccupations like not mixing with bad company or being seduced by loose women. After Chapter 9, wise sayings, often contained in a single verse, come out like bullets from a machine gun, often switching focus from one subject to another, and often these are not obviously related other than it is to do with the central wisdom theme. This will become marvellously obvious if readers take up my suggestion of reading a chapter a day, followed by a time of reflection.

What is so thrilling is the practicality of what is said by one who has lived long enough to experience life in the raw but given wisdom from on High to make some sort of sense of it whether disciplining children, the value of hard work, the art of the deal, how to treat women, being honest in business, the power of the tongue, maintaining one's own counsel – and so much more. To cite my NIV Study Bible: these proverbs range widely across the broad spectrum of human situations, relationships and responsibilities; offering insights, warnings, instructions and counsels, along with frequent motivations to heed them. In a variety of situations and relationships, the reader is exhorted to honesty, integrity, diligence, kindness, generosity, readiness to forgive, truthfulness, patience, humility, cheerfulness, loyalty, temperance, self-control and the prudent consideration of consequences that flow from attitudes, choices and/or actions. Anger should be held in check, violence and quarrelsomeness shunned, gossip avoided, arrogance repudiated. Drunkenness, gluttony, envy and greed should all be renounced. The poor are not to be exploited, the courts are not to be unjustly manipulated, legitimate authorities are to be honored. Parents should care for the proper instruction and discipline of their children, and children should duly honor their parents and bring no disgrace on them. Human observation and experience have taught the wise that a certain order is in place in God's creation. To honor it leads to known positive effects; to defy it leads only to unhappy consequences. Life should be lived in conscious awareness of the unfailing scrutiny of the Lord and in reliance on His generous providence.

### **Interpreting Proverbs**

Unlike with the Song of songs, where there are two quite distinct ways of interpreting the Song that see Christian pundits going off in different directions

– one a story of two lovers graphically described and the other a metaphor on how the divine and human can interact in love, such controversy does not apply to Proverbs. Even the unbeliever should affirm there is a lot of sensible stuff to be found; readers are left in no doubt the author means what he says and says what he means. Sometime it veers on the politically incorrect and could upset a generation not used to having their sensibilities upset, or those trusting in their own righteousness, but when it comes to interpretation, we are generally left in no doubt, although the temptation of preachers to extrapolate his ideas is real.

Given Proverbs is part of the inspired Word of God, I offer the following thoughts, with a degree of trepidation ... Obviously Solomon's preoccupations, implicit in his choice of words, are not necessarily my own and nor can they be, given Israel 3000 years ago is not the world I live in today and my experience and perspectives on life are not the same as Solomon's. An example from right at the beginning is his fixation on the need to keep good company and avoid bad. This is an all too real scenario of course and many readers have their own examples of what happens as a result of choosing right and wrong company.

But to go out and murder someone in order to gain materially etc. is not one most of us face. As to how to deal with women we may find ourselves sexually attracted to, being lured into an adulterous relationship by a loose woman is likely the least of our problems. When we come to the end and consider "the wife of noble character", while it is all good stuff, I know of few wives who include in her duties daily organising the household servants. My point is, some licence is needed in our application, a realisation these are principles to apply and not hard and fast rules to follow and the key issue is one of wisdom. This is *not* the Law or the Prophets, but if we imbibe what is contained in these proverbs, while we cannot escape calamity, we have the wherewithal by which we can fruitfully live our lives as God desires and we and others will be blessed.

This is particularly pertinent if upon taking on board all the advice contained in the sayings of Solomon as the blueprint to follow in life, especially if taking a view that if we do so then life will go well for us and then finding like Job and David when having done all this life does not go well. The best we should say is if we are to follow Proverbs advice, we are more likely to reap the benefits, but life will not necessarily go smoothly. We need to go no further than read Job and Ecclesiastes for confirmation that is the case. Sometimes, fools seem to prosper and the wise suffer, at least from a temporal as opposed to an eternal perspective. There are many examples such is the case to found in the Psalms.

Yet Proverbs is worth pondering because it is so applicable, even if in each succeeding generation there are different applications. What is so incredible

about Proverbs is it is so modern in its outlook despite having been written 3000 years ago with some of its wisdom known long before then. We may well think, if only more people followed the advice in Proverbs – if only I had? Many godly people of yesteryear have impressed on earnest believers the importance of daily meditating on the Psalms as a way to approach the challenges and often disappointments of life. The same advice might be given concerning Proverbs.

I for one will admit to regretting not following the profound wisdom to be found in this book as much as I ought when it comes to deciding how to go about the business of daily living and making wise choices. I therefore commend the thirty-one meditations that follow, but whether readers choose to follow my train of thought or not, or indeed come up with their own set of reflections, I guarantee they will be blessed by finding wisdom, carefully studying Proverbs.

## Day 1: Fear and Wisdom (1:7)

*“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction”*

We begin our journey through Proverbs with a text relating to a theme that is referred to several times throughout the book, because it is central to what the author (Solomon) wants to say, in particular to his son, who tragically failed to follow a lot of what he had to say. Our text is the culmination of the prologue (1:1-7) to Proverbs, which after having identified it was his proverbs then tells his reader(s) his purpose in writing, i.e. *“to know wisdom and instruction”* (1:2) etc. There remains a choice we all have to make: follow the way of wisdom and instruction (heeding that which we are rightly taught) or the way of the fool which is the way not just of stupidity but of wickedness and immorality.

It is worth dwelling a while on what the words our English Bibles translate as “fear”, “knowledge” and “wisdom” so we are talking about the same thing:

**Fear** (Hebrew: *yare*) can be translated by anything from respect to dread but commonly understood by learned commentators to mean reverence and awe.

**Knowledge** (Hebrew: *yada*) goes beyond intellectually informed and includes notions of perceiving, learning, understanding, performing, and experiencing.

**Wisdom** (Hebrew: *chokmah*) enables us to skilfully apply knowledge gained, to understand life from God’s perspective and do the right thing at the right time.

As far as Solomon is concerned, the wise man does what he does out of the fear of the Lord and foolish man does what he does ignoring the fear of the Lord and even in this chapter he gives practical examples, as: *“my son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not”* (1:10). He then gives a graphic example of someone being enticed by the wrong crowd, to murder an innocent person for ill-gotten gain, something that someone who truly possessed wisdom would avoid.

*“Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets”* (1:20) and yet it is ultimately up to the hearer whether or not he heeds that voice. The result of whether or not we decide to heed or not heed that voice is a stark one: *“For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them. But whoso hearkeneth unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil”* (1:32:33). The choice before us today therefore is whether or not we choose to fear the Lord and listen to the voice of wisdom.

**Prayer:** Lord help us to follow the path of wisdom and reject the path of foolishness; to do so not just because we will be better off but to honour you.

## Day 2: Seeking understanding (2: 3-5)

*“Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; Then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God.”*

Linked with wisdom and knowledge is understanding (Hebrew: *binah*), which is more than merely accumulating information. It is about knowing the meaning of what it is that registers in our minds and the ability to correctly discern what is good or bad, desirable or undesirable, right or wrong etc. “Understand” is a word that appears 62 times in Proverbs, six times in this chapter – highlighting the important part it plays in following the right way. It should be added that all three: wisdom, knowledge, understanding closely associate with the fear of the Lord and do not relate to one’s educational attainment or how clever we are seen to be according to worldly standards, and is available for all who seek it.

What is evident from the outset is that not only is understanding worth having (more so than silver and hidden treasures) but it is something that needs to be sought after and searched for (it does not just happen) with the result: the fear and knowledge of God (2:5), wisdom, knowledge, understanding (2:6), God to be our shield (2:7), our ways are preserved (2:8), a good path to be laid out for us (2:9), there is pleasantness to the soul (2:10), we are kept in the way (2:11) and delivered from bad people (2:12). “No pain, no gain” may not quite be the figure of speech to use here, but it is likely that most do not seek and search for these things perceiving the pain, but if they do the gain is more than worth it.

As for the bad people (the fools) that the wise and understanding are to be delivered from, Solomon was in no doubt where they are heading and, along with them, those who do not do what he says: darkness (2:13), perverseness (2:14), crookedness (2:15). And then there is the *forbidden woman* (2:16) (a theme he is to return to again) warning of the dire results of falling into her clutches, for *“none who go to her come back, nor do they regain the paths of life”* (2:19). He summarises what happens taking either path: *“For the upright shall dwell in the land, and the perfect shall remain in it. But the wicked shall be cut off from the earth, and the transgressors shall be rooted out of it”* (2:21,22). The challenge facing us is which path will we take and how desirous are we to seek after the way of wisdom, knowledge and understanding?

**Prayer:** Thank you Lord for showing us that knowledge and understanding is something worth seeking out and searching for and in so doing we find treasure and what truly matters in life. May we be people who make this our priority and in doing so avoid the way of the fool and respond to your call on our lives.

### **Day 3: Trust in the Lord (3:5,6)**

*“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.”*

Proverbs is full of memorable quotes that often crop up in sermons or when one person exhorts another, and our text today could well be at the top the list. Our text is wedged between two related thoughts: the benefits follow from keeping God’s commands (3:1-4) and the blessings that ensue when we put God first in our lives (3:7-10). Our text is one that we can refer to every day of our lives as it always applies. But first, let us break down our text into four components:

***Trust in the Lord*** – the exhortation to trust the Lord as opposed to ourselves, anyone or anything else, is repeated many times in the Bible, but the reality is that too often there is a “but” as to why we do not do what we are told is right.

***Lean not unto thine own understanding*** – the natural human tendency is for ourselves to be the key to getting understanding, which as we discussed earlier is something desirable. The message here is clear – it ought to be Him, not us.

***In all thy ways acknowledge him*** – we also tend often to forget or ignore the Lord in the plethora of activities that occupy us in life, and that is a mistake. It would be true to say that the more we acknowledge Him the more He blesses.

***He shall direct thy paths*** – we all need to be guided throughout our journey in life, easy and hard, big and small, right now and long term, and we can all look back on making right choices and wrong choices. But the climax of our text is that if we do what is required of us, He will direct us concerning the right path.

As far as material for meditation, in this like in many chapters we are spoilt for choice, and while some of the thoughts we do not share now will crop up in later chapters and we will reflect on, just in case they do not, we set a marker here. The following then are some texts, relevant for today, worth pondering:

1. *“Be not afraid of sudden fear, neither of the desolation of the wicked, when it cometh”* (v25)
2. *“Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thine hand to do it”* (v27)
3. *“Envy thou not the oppressor, and choose none of his ways”* (v31)
4. *“He scorneth the scorners: but he giveth grace unto the lowly”* (v34)

**Prayer:** we thank you Lord it is ever your desire to direct our paths and that is true for the big and hard choices we have to make as well as the small and easy ones. We are sorry we don’t always trust and acknowledge you and lean on our own understanding. Today we put our trust in you and give you all the glory.

#### **Day 4: Guard your heart (4:23)**

*“Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.”*

Before we attend to our verse for the day, it is worth recapping the earlier part of the chapter, which is repeating and reinforcing what has already been said, particularly the paramount importance of getting wisdom and understanding, and avoiding the path of the wicked and evil men, and what happens (whether blessing or cursing, life or death, honour or shame) if we, or specifically the son Solomon was trying to influence, chooses or not the way of wisdom: e.g. *“Exalt her, and she shall promote thee: she shall bring thee to honour, when thou dost embrace her”* (4:8). Wisdom is referred to (as in chapter 3) as “she”, something we will return to later when we find a whole chapter is devoted to lady wisdom.

We are also reminded here of the importance of the heart, e.g. *“let them not depart from thine eyes; keep them in the midst of thine heart”* (4:21). “Heart” is referred to 82 times in Proverbs in a large array of different contexts. The word’s first appearance is *“so that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding”* (2:2). “Heart” (Hebrew *lebab*) occurs 724 times in the Old Testament, indicating its importance as that which determines how we respond to or determine what to do in our life’s journey. It denotes a person’s centre for both physical and emotional-intellectual-moral activities. In the Ancient World the heart represented the origin of our thoughts and centre of our being. The Great Command includes loving YHWH with all our heart.

Two modern renditions of our text are *“keep vigilant watch over your heart; that’s where life starts”* and *“be careful how you think; your life is shaped by your thoughts”*. The point is that the heart is where our choice of everything we do, think, say, sense, feel etc. begins, and if we invite harmful “stuff”, whether thoughts, opinions, influences, habits, decisions etc. that take us away from the path God has for us, we are on a slippery slope that leads to destruction. Just as we pursue wisdom with all diligence, so should we be guarding our heart. Our chapter ends reminding us of the need to follow the straight path and not to turn away from it. *“Let thine eyes look right on, and let thine eyelids look straight before thee. Ponder the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established. Turn not to the right hand nor to the left: remove thy foot from evil”* (4:24-27).

**Prayer:** we thank you Lord for your words of life. May they not just be in our heads but dwell in our hearts. We are sorry for the times when our hearts have turned away from you. We thank you for reminding us of the importance of keeping our hearts with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life, and giving us the grace to do so. May we be those who love you with all our hearts.

## Day 5: The loving deer (5:18,19)

*“Let thy fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the wife of thy youth. Let her be as the loving hind and pleasant roe; let her breasts satisfy thee at all times; and be thou ravished always with her love.”*

In exhorting his son to pay attention to wisdom and listen carefully to counsel, Solomon brings up again (and he will do so again later) the matter of the loose, predatory woman, whose clutches he needs to avoid. Sexual immorality, while one of many sins we can fall into, is something all too prevalent and alluring in our culture that manifests itself in many ways, as well as there being many ways we can yield to the temptation of sexual sin. We have here just one example of many, where we can go astray, as is often borne out by experience, even among those we least expect, with tragic repercussions. We are told: *“Do not love the world or anything in the world ... For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life”* 1 John 2:15,16; also *“flee sexual immorality”* 1 Corinthians 6:18 and *“youthful lusts”* 2 Timothy 2:22.

If there is a remedy to falling to sexual temptation, it is instruction (translated as discipline too) (Hebrew: *musar*). *“For lack of discipline they will die, led astray by their own great folly”* (NIV 5:23). And then we are told: *“Drink waters out of thine own cistern, and running waters out of thine own well. Let thy fountains be dispersed abroad, and rivers of waters in the streets. Let them be only thine own, and not strangers with thee. Let thy fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the wife of thy youth”* (5:15-18). While marriage is not for everyone, and is not without challenges, e.g. if a wife is *“disgraceful”* (12:4), *“quarrelsome”* (19:3), *“nagging”* (21:19), men who are married need be faithful to their wife, cherish and delight in her, resist all temptation to sexual immorality, and to be wise!

Solomon does not shy away from the importance of sexuality and pleasure, as seen in his Song of Songs. A husband should picture his wife as a loving hind (deer) and a graceful doe. He should be intoxicated by her love. Proverbs, like the Song, shows that God considers physical attraction and conjugal love within a marriage as beautiful and commendable. The difference between sexual love in marriage and sensual lust in adultery is striking. The former is lifelong and satisfying; the latter is momentary and destructive. God instituted marriage between a man and a woman as a lifelong, loving partnership. When an adulterer breaks the bond of that partnership, pain and remorse fill his soul. Solomon’s fixation on marital fidelity is one of the great examples of wisdom

**Prayer:** we thank you Lord for the gift of marriage and, for those of us who are married, our spouses. Help us to be good husbands and wives and to resist the temptation of breaking our marriage vows. Cleanse us all from any impurity. We know discipline can be hard; may we receive and not despise instruction.

## Day 6: Go to the ant (6:6)

*“Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise.”*

Proverbs, as we see and will see more, is refreshingly, irreligiously, practical and totally down to earth. It begins with a warning against putting up security for a friend’s debt and the need to get out of that arrangement (6:1) and later the danger of looking to bad people, however enticing (6:12-15), and seven short sharp sayings of things the Lord hates: *“A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren”* (6:17-18), ending with warnings of what happens to the thief and adulterer. But for today’s thought: we consider the ant.

Ants are great teachers (30:24-28). As a natural history buff, Solomon would have seen and derived many lessons for life. Ants are diligent, by working hard without coercion, and prudent by saving part of all production. This in contrast with a sluggard, a person who is slow, lazy, and does not like to work hard. He is a pain and risk to those that must rely on him (10:26). Diligent men, or those that work hard, will be successful (10:4; 12:24; 14:23; 22:29; 28:19), but lazy men, who avoid hard work, ultimately lose out (6:10-11; 12:24; 19:15; 20:4,13; 24:30-34). Sluggards are too arrogant to be taught (26:16). They stay in bed, for they love sleep (6:9-11; 20:13; 24:30-34). They have energy to turn back and forth in bed, but not to get food to their mouths (26:14-15). They want the good things of life like others, but they do not want to work for them (13:4). Ants have an excellent work ethic, unlike sluggards. They get up, get to work, and stay at work. They are always moving, quickly and energetically. They work efficiently, tirelessly and fast. They do not stand around, sit around, or drag through their work. They do not pace themselves to spread work out: they go right at a project and work hard until it is finished. They will not quit until the job is done. They do not need supervision (6:7), for they find something to do without direction. When times are good, they work hard to store up for bad times (6:8); they do not take it easy because there is the appearance of plenty. They store surplus rather than eat it all. They deny short-term pleasure for long-term prosperity. They help their colony succeed. They are unselfish. They do not choose the easiest way or get discouraged if the job is hard. When facing difficulties, they energetically try again until they are successful. They will go great distances from home in order to find their food. Let us be like the ant!

**Prayer:** Thank you Lord for the example of the ant. May we follow this rather than that of the sluggard. There is so much that needs to be done here on planet earth and we need to be smart, diligent and hard working. Help us to do that.

## Day 7: Keep God's commands (7:1)

*"My son, keep my words, and lay up my commandments with thee."*

As already noted, and will see more of in later chapters, Proverbs is packed full of wisdom relating to many different aspects of life. Slightly frustrating for one trying to cover as many of these, which seem just as if not more pertinent than Solomon's obsession with immoral women, in 31 days' worth of meditations, for yet again Solomon devotes the majority of this chapter to a theme he has already done, so it seems, to proverbial death – that of the lustful, predatory woman intent on seducing "my son" using crafty flattery. Ours is not to argue why the Bible emphasises certain things more than others. Such scenarios are clearly important as he lays out how the woman entraps and the gullibility of the man along with his fate, which is "*the way to hell*" (1:27), when he succumbs. We might also infer that sexual sin in all sorts of guises has a similar outcome. It is why, as pointed out earlier, we need our own intimate relationship with wisdom and understanding and: "*to say unto wisdom, Thou art my sister; and call understanding thy kinswoman*" (7:4) to prevent this, for by doing so we find the way of life as opposed to that of death. While we title our thought for today as "**keeping God's commands**", as far as Solomon was concerned, they are *my* (i.e. his commands) and his words, reminding us of the need to take heed of wise counsel, primarily a parental responsibility, but also from those who are wise.

Keeping these commands are important, which we must treasure greatly: "*keep my commandments, and live; and my law as the apple of thine eye*" (7:2). We are told: "*Bind them upon thy fingers, write them upon the table of thine heart*" (7:3), reminding us how the Children of Israel were expected to treat the Law God gave Moses: "*And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes*" Deuteronomy 6:8. While, as New Testament people, we are under grace, not law, doing the right thing as God sets it out is of paramount importance. Taking heed to what is God's blueprint for living our lives should be that of *the apple of thine eye* and these "commands" should be bound to our fingers and written on our hearts. We ought to concur with the Psalmist: "*With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments*" Psalm 119:10.

**Prayer:** We thank you for your commands Lord, which are for our own good, to obey. We are sorry when we break them. May we greatly desire wisdom and understanding and treasure your commands so we keep on the straight path.

## Day 8: Wisdom cries out (8:1)

*“Doth not wisdom cry? and understanding put forth her voice?”*

A dominant theme of these early chapters is of the all too prevalent lure of sin, in contrast to the call of wisdom, yet can be countered by wisdom: violence and protection (ch. 1); perverseness and righteousness (ch. 2); arrogance and humility (ch. 3); darkness and light (ch. 4); adultery and marital love (ch. 5); laziness and diligence (ch. 6); sexual temptation and purity (ch. 7). All this is covered, and much else besides, in wisdom’s cry, which is loud and open and to all persons, high and low, and the result of which is fruit that lasts a lifetime.

As for lady wisdom, in contrast to that which is sin: *“my mouth shall speak truth; and wickedness is an abomination to my lips. All the words of my mouth are in righteousness; there is nothing froward or perverse in them. They are all plain to him that understandeth, and right to them that find knowledge. Receive my instruction, and not silver; and knowledge rather than choice gold. For wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it”* (8:7-11). As for wisdom’s rewards: *“I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me ... My fruit is better than gold, yea, than fine gold; and my revenue than choice silver ... That I may cause those that love me to inherit substance; and I will fill their treasures.”* (8:17,19, 21).

Then what may come as a surprise, yet important in establishing the value of wisdom, is a section that takes us way back to the beginning of time: *“The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was”* (8:22,23). We then read about the various acts of creation, and always wisdom was there: *“I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men”* (8:30,31). We are told (John 1:1-3) Jesus was with God in the beginning and he is also wisdom: *“Christ the power of God, and the **wisdom** of God”* 1 Corinthians 1:24 and *“In whom are hid all the treasures of **wisdom** and knowledge”* Colossians 2:3. This chapter ends, reminding us of the stark choice facing us all, either by finding wisdom or rejecting it: *“For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord. But he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul: all they that hate me love death”* (8:35,36).

**Prayer:** we thank you Lord Jesus you are the wisdom of God, who was there in the beginning. We thank you wisdom is ever crying out and can be found by the least of us. We thank you for the rich rewards given to those who find wisdom. May it be that we continually walk in the path of wisdom and reject that of sin.

## **Day 9: Reprove not a scorner (9:8,9)**

*“Reprove not a scorner, lest he hate thee: rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee. Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser: teach a just man, and he will increase in learning.”*

Before we turn to the “Proverbs of Solomon”, Chapter 10 onwards, which is an assortment of short, pithy quotes, skilfully covering many subjects from sublime to the ridiculous, without pious gobbly gook, we round off these earlier chapters that are to do primarily with wisdom and understanding, and the importance of fearing the Lord and knowing Him, encapsulated in one of the most memorable of all the proverbs: *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding”* (9:10). We are told at the start of our chapter *“wisdom hath builded her house”* (9:1). She is inviting all and sundry to dine at her house, notably those who are confused about life, and not knowing what’s going on, and for them to leave their impoverished confusion and live.

Try as best we might, our persuading people to follow the right path is going to work with some but not all. We are told if we do try to reason with an arrogant cynic, we will effectively get slapped in the face and, when we confront bad behaviour, we may well get a kick in the teeth. The moral is not to waste time on a scoffer as all we will get for our pains is abuse. But if we correct those who care about life, that is a different proposition: they will love us for it. The moral here is to save our breath for the wise and they will be wiser for it. We should tell them what we know and they will profit from it. The lesson is skilled living gets its start in the fear of God and insight into life from knowing a Holy God. It is through Lady Wisdom that our lives deepen, and the years of our lives ripen. The choice is a stark one and one we all need to make: live wisely and wisdom will permeate your life; mock life and life will mock you. Being told we are wrong is never easy and neither is receiving counsel that takes us out of our comfort zone but if we want to be truly just and wise then we know what to do. We conclude this section of Proverbs by returning to an often-repeated theme, that of a predatory, immoral woman trying to entice the foolish, who may well be going about his regular business, to do the wrong thing. *“Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant”* (9:17) may appear an attractive proposition, but consider where going down that path ends: *“he knoweth not that the dead are there; and that her guests are in the depths of hell”* (9:18).

**Prayer:** we thank you for the wonderful truth that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the holy is understanding. May we be those who seek after wisdom and righteousness; to receive instruction to be wiser and teaching to add to knowledge so that in all things we may honour you.

## Day 10: A wise son (10:1)

*“The proverbs of Solomon. A wise son maketh a glad father: but a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother.”*

As we begin to break down “the proverbs of Solomon”, it is worth bearing in mind two related themes that occur several times in what follows. The first is the pre-occupation of the father (and the mother too) to instil wisdom in his son. Proverbs has a lot to say on hopes for and expectations of sons and on principles such as bringing up children, which we will return to. For now, consider this practical and consequential aspect: *“he that gathereth in summer is a wise son: but he that sleepeth in harvest is a son that causeth shame”* (10:5). Our second theme is the notion of “righteous”, which is, it is hoped, the hallmark of how a son would live his life from that point on, and is something that those of us who are Christian parents might and should want of our children, above all, to be. The words “righteousness” (Hebrew *tsedaqah*), “righteous” (Hebrew *tsaddiq*) carries with them the meaning of blameless, innocence, justice, ethical conduct and is an important attribute of God and His expectation for people. The words appear 510 times in the Bible, 75 times in Proverbs and 10 times in this chapter, all in a positive context, such that we are left in no doubt as to its importance:

1. *Treasures of wickedness profit nothing: but righteousness delivereth from death* (10:2)
2. *The Lord will not suffer the soul of the righteous to famish: but he casteth away the substance of the wicked* (10:3)
3. *The mouth of a righteous man is a well of life: but violence covereth the mouth of the wicked* (10:11)
4. *The labour of the righteous tend to life: the fruit of the wicked sin* (10:16)
5. *The lips of the righteous feed many: fools die for want of wisdom* (10:21)
6. *The fear of the wicked, it shall come upon him: but the desire of the righteous shall be granted* (10:24)
7. *As the whirlwind passeth, so is the wicked no more: but the righteous is an everlasting foundation* (10:25)
8. *The hope of the righteous shall be gladness: but the expectation of the wicked shall perish* (10:28)
9. *The righteous shall never be removed: but the wicked shall not inhabit the earth* (10:30)
10. *The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable: but the mouth of the wicked speaketh frowardness* (10:32)

**Prayer:** Thank you Lord for sons. Those of us who are parents, help us to bring them up well. Those of us who are sons, may we act wisely and righteously.

## **Day 11: The liberal soul (11:25)**

*“The liberal soul shall be made fat: and he that watereth shall be watered also himself.”*

Or *“Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered”* (ESV) or *“A generous person will be prosperous, and one who gives others plenty of water will himself be given plenty”* (NASB) or *“Yes, the liberal man shall be rich! By watering others, he waters himself”* (Living Bible). *“The one who blesses others is abundantly blessed; those who help others are helped”* (MSG). Selecting a text of the day from many wonderful texts is a nigh impossible task. We are confronted with right on target truths, e.g. maintaining a fair balance (11:1), with pride comes shame (11:2) why we shouldn't trust in riches (11:4). We can go on with the gems found in the next 27 verses. The importance of righteousness, which we identified in the previous chapter, continues to be referred to (12 times in chapter 11). It delivers from death (11:4); keeps us in the straight way (11:5) and delivers the upright (11:6).

As we reflect on today's text, we are hit wonderfully hard with the importance of having a generous spirit, which desire is to give and not to withhold. Human nature being the way it is, we can easily be generous to some and not others or choose the time or circumstances in which we can show generosity or liberality or simply bless others. But the truly liberal man is not constrained and will use whatever opportunity he has to be a blessing to other people and, come to think of it, it might be something we should all consider in our dealings with people, even those we may feel not obligated to or naturally drawn toward. While our acting in this way should be its own reward, we receive an additional reward promised here: *“he that watereth shall be watered also himself”*. If there is a moral, it is we can do so knowing that we cannot outgive or out bless God. Interesting are the verses before our text, indicating this attitude of liberality is a culmination of righteous living: *“The desire of the righteous is only good: but the expectation of the wicked is wrath. There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth; and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty”* (11:23,24), as well as the verse to follow, which reminds us of what happens if our attitude is not generous: *“He that withholdeth corn, the people shall curse him: but blessing shall be upon the head of him that selleth it”* (11:26). We end reminded again of the stark choice: *“The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise. Behold, the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth: much more the wicked and the sinner”* (11:30,31).

**Prayer:** May we be generous people Lord, who live our lives such that we can be a blessing to other people. We thank you that you bless the liberal soul.

## Day 12: Heaviness of heart (12:25)

*“Heaviness in the heart of man maketh it stoop: but a good word maketh it glad.”*

There are two key aspects to our text for today: the recognition of depression and how it can bring us down (*worry weighs us down*) and what might be seen as the antidote: the timely word of encouragement that can lift us up (*a cheerful word picks us up*). As for having the blues or being depressed, it is a common human experience, and the last thing we should be doing is to tell people to pull themselves together. We can perhaps identify, for example, with the Psalmist, who was able to say: *“why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance”* Psalm 42:5. Just as a heart can be made heavy (for whatever reason and the reasons are many), so one way to lift someone out of depression is a good word, as with the Servant, who we often identify with Jesus, could and did give: *“The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned”* Isaiah 50:4.

The powerful effect of the spoken word, often linked to that of the tongue, is a reoccurring theme in Proverbs, including in this chapter: *“He that speaketh truth sheweth forth righteousness: but a false witness deceit. There is that speaketh like the piercings of a sword: but the tongue of the wise is health. The lip of truth shall be established for ever: but a lying tongue is but for a moment ... Lying lips are abomination to the Lord: but they that deal truly are his delight* (11:17-19, 22). It is a sobering thought that our tongue, which can do so much good, such as lifting up the downcast, can also do much harm: *“It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell. This is scary: You can tame a tiger, but you can’t tame a tongue—it’s never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer. With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth!”* (James 3:5-9 MSG).

Other gems include: delighting in God (12:2), being rooted in God (12:3), a good wife (12:4), talking sense (12:8), good to be ordinary (12:9), kindness to animals (12:10), staying on the job (12:11), righteous give life (12:12)

**Prayer:** We recognise we all can be downhearted and there are many things that might dampen our spirits. Lord, help us to see it in others so that we may be those who bring a timely word of blessing. Help us to use our tongue wisely.

### **Day 13: When to keep quiet (13:3)**

*“He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life: but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction.”*

Our first thought is to continue where we left off yesterday, about the power of the tongue. In our text, it is more than implied that it may well go better for us if we say little: *“self-control means controlling the tongue! A quick retort can ruin everything”*. We may all look back with regret when we said something when it was better to say nothing. The moral is: a few well-chosen words are better than many that aren't. We want to speak when we think we have something needful to say but, if we do, we should adopt the true, necessary and kind principle and ask three questions: is what we say factually correct; do we really need to say it and does it lift people up rather than put them down? We do well to remember: *“let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few”* Ecclesiastes 5:2.

For our second thought, we are reminded of the importance of hope: *“Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life”* (13:12). Few can live comfortably if hope, whatever it happens to be in, is absent. Our motive for living is because we have hope and, for Christians, it includes the coming of Christ and eternal life. But in our text, hope is delayed, indefinitely perhaps, and as a result the seat of our emotions, our heart, is sick. True to its lack of moralising, Solomon does not identify where our hopes ought to lay. It merely points out the consequences when hope is or isn't forthcoming.

Our third thought returns to a theme already touched on and it will be again, for example: *“Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it”* (22:6). Another just as memorable but more controversial text is today's: *“He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes”* (13:14). Beating a child who misbehaves does not sit well in our culture today. It is not our intention to say if and when to apply such punishment. It is also noted that no-one who has children brings them up 100% perfectly and for some parents it is far lower than that. But it might equally be observed that unruly behaviour in a child, that might we extend into adulthood, is often a result of a lack of parental discipline. Solomon was, as we have noted earlier, a failed father, given what we know about his son, Rehoboam. He knew what he needed to do and, while we can't score his parenting record, we can say Solomon did at least offer sound advice that all parents would do well to apply.

**Prayer:** help us Lord to speak only when we need to. When we do, help us say the right thing in the right way. Help us be good parents in bringing up children.

## Day 14: A way which seems right (14:12)

*“There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death”.*

Before we consider three texts, including the above, let us first revisit three related themes, key to understanding Proverbs and specifically our three texts: righteousness, wisdom and the fear of the Lord; for example *“Every wise woman buildeth her house: but the foolish plucketh it down with her hands. He that walketh in his uprightness feareth the Lord: but he that is perverse in his ways despiseth him. In the mouth of the foolish is a rod of pride: but the lips of the wise shall preserve them”* (14:1-3) and *“The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way: but the folly of fools is deceit. Fools make a mock at sin: but among the righteous there is favour”* (14:8,9). It is worth bringing in here Jesus parable of the wise and foolish builders Matthew 7:24-27. There are two categories: the wise and foolish, and it poses the question, which one are we in? This matters because humankind likes to think its actions are right, and often proudly says so, but this belief can turn out wrong, even to the point of death.

Our second text relates to the way we treat the poor, another recurring Proverbs theme and, while they may be at the bottom of the societal heap such can easily invite mistreatment, with little to repay those who show them compassion, the righteous, wise, God fearers are the very ones who should step in. There may be nothing in it for them, other than happily doing the right. *“He that oppresseth the poor reproacheth his Maker: but he that honoureth him hath mercy on the poor”* (11:31). We are also told: *“The poor is hated even of his own neighbour: but the rich hath many friends. He that despiseth his neighbour sinneth: but he that hath mercy on the poor, happy is he”* (11:20,21). Day to day observance reveals many opportunities to bless the poor. As God fearers today continue to show mercy, so do some who aren't, sometimes putting those who are to shame. Our third text is *“Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people”* (11:34). It provides an important reason why righteousness is needed – it makes a country strong, and why sin is a bad thing – it leaves people weak. We lament, especially if living in lands with a rich Judaeo-Christian heritage, when God's law is (increasingly) rejected and the unrighteous often call the tune. An example of societal wickedness is aborting babies. The righteous may want their country to turn to righteousness, adopt righteous laws and practices and governed by righteous people but such expectation may be unrealistic, yet if sin is endorsed people suffer. Our task is being exemplars of righteousness.

**Prayer:** Lord, may righteousness, wisdom and the fear of you feature highly in our life as we make plans, care for the poor and intercede for our nation.

## Day 15: A soft answer (15:1)

*“A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.”*

Are we feeling challenged and uplifted as we reach the half way point in our journey through Proverbs? We should be as we meditate and one verse after another jumps out of the pages, combining down to earthiness and up in the cloudiness, as profound truth strikes to the core. Today we revisit two key themes: the use of the tongue and fear of the Lord, while doing our customary injustice to a lot else besides that helps us in our journey on the way of wisdom.

There is an all too human propensity to let rip our righteous indignation with a piece of our mind (invariably manifesting itself through the use of our tongue). Solomon shows us a better way: *“A gentle response defuses anger, but a sharp tongue kindles a temper-fire”* (MSG). How often might we look back when a few well-chosen words gently spoken, let us say in a spirit of reconciliation and grace, calmed what could have become a fraught and acrimonious situation and when the converse made things worse. This is not a lecture on how to be meek and mild, for as Solomon tells us elsewhere, there is: *“a time to keep silence, and a time to speak”* Ecclesiastes 3:7, but he lays down an important principle that more often than not, in awkward situations, we do well to adopt. As for the use of the tongue, consider: *“The tongue of the wise useth knowledge aright: but the mouth of fools poureth out foolishness ... A wholesome tongue is a tree of life: but perverseness therein is a breach in the spirit ... The lips of the wise disperse knowledge: but the heart of the foolish doeth not so”* (15:2,4,7).

Just as with the use of the tongue, there is more profound truth associated with the notion of the fear of the Lord, for example when we are told having little of this world's goods with the fear of the Lord is better than having a lot without that fear, reminding us of texts as: *“godliness with contentment is great gain”* (1 Timothy 6:6). *“Better is little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble therewith. Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith”* (15:16,17). The remainder of the chapter paints a picture of a wise, righteous, peace loving, thoughtful man, who is ever seeking wisdom, open to reproof and instruction, content with the little he has but confident the Lord hears his prayers, unlike the foolish, proud, greedy, wicked man who does the opposite, whose end is ignominious. The chapter concludes: *“The fear of the Lord is the instruction of wisdom; and before honour is humility”* (15:33).

**Prayer:** help us to be content with the little we have and prioritise what matters as we fear you O Lord. Help us in the use our tongues by saying the right words in the right spirit, always seasoned with salt, seeking humility before honour.

## **Day 16: Pride comes before a fall (16:18)**

*“Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.”*

Also *“Better it is to be of an humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud”* (16:19). “Pride comes before a fall” is one saying often found in every day speech, with people often not realising it originated in Proverbs. But before we reflect on the matter of pride, we are reminded, as is often Solomon’s want, before landing us with a particular gem, he precedes it by “better is it” advice, and ground earlier covered, including the part wisdom, by which we should live our lives, plays, as well as to put us humbly and soundly in our place. *“Mortals make elaborate plans, but God has the last word. Humans are satisfied with whatever looks good; God probes for what is good. Put God in charge of your work, then what you’ve planned will take place ... Far better to be right and poor than to be wrong and rich. We plan the way we want to live, but only God makes us able to live it”* (16:1-3,6-9 MSG). It is worth recalling Proverbs is primarily about setting out the way of wisdom and however smart we may consider ourselves to be, we can’t outsmart the Almighty who knows our motives and can foresee the outcome of our actions. It is why we need to commit all what we do to God and doing it His way. Even if we have little to show for our efforts, what matters is to do it His way for Him. If there is a moral here, it is better to be humble than proud, poor than rich.

Pride is associated with feelings of pleasure in achievement, accomplishment, of something we have done or are or in someone else and is often associated with conceit, egotism, vanity, vain glory, and one’s own appearance or status in life. It is a dangerous thing that can take us away from God. Besides today’s text, we read *“A man’s pride shall bring him low: but honour shall uphold the humble in spirit”* (29:3). We are warned: *“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world”* 1 John 2:15,16, and *“God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble”* James 4:6. The Bible is full of examples of man’s (and also Satan’s) pride. While frustratingly the proud person may seem to prosper for a season, he will come to a sad end and will eventually fall, while the humble person will be blessed. Pride is a trap we can easily fall into, for such is the human heart. The brutal truth is *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?”* Jeremiah 17:9. To avoid falling into this trap we do well to follow the way of the wisdom.

**Prayer:** Lord we commit our being and doing to following the way of wisdom. Forgive our pride and deliver us from it. May we ever identify with the humble.

## **Day 17: The quiet life (17:1)**

*“Better is a dry morsel, and quietness therewith, than an house full of sacrifices with strife.”*

It would be somewhat dishonest to encapsulate the many profound and different thoughts in what we know are artificial demarcations, i.e. chapters of the Bible, under a single heading, but one recurring Ch.17 theme is the agreeableness of a quiet and peaceful life. Again, Solomon masterfully used powerful illustrations to make an important point. In our text, it is about how much better it is to eat a very basic diet and have a life of contented peace than one where one can eat great food at banquets, but there is strife and aggravation. There is something to be said too for applying the maxim *“godliness with contentment is great gain”* (1 Timothy 6:6). Peace (completeness, soundness, welfare) (Hebrew: *shalom*) is important to have, occurring 237 times in the OT, and was how YHWH wanted to bless his people. It is seen in the blessing: *“The Lord bless thee, and keep thee ... and give thee peace”* Numbers 6:24-26. We do well to follow the counsel: *“Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord”* Hebrews 12:14. Also relevant is that the coming Messiah is called *“The Prince of Peace”* (Isaiah 9:6) and *“of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end”* (Isaiah 9:7) and God *“wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee”* (Isaiah 26:3). Also *“My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandments: For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee”* (3:2).

A further observation about the desirability of peace is our attitude, especially when wronged by others, by our not stirring up trouble when it is easy to do so and being a calming influence in situations when peace is needed and which complements Jesus’ *“blessed are the peacemakers”* teaching: *“He that covereth a transgression seeketh love; but he that repeateth a matter separateth very friends ... The beginning of strife is as when one letteth out water: therefore leave off contention, before it be meddled with”* (17:9,14). One could also add *“A reproof entereth more into a wise man than an hundred stripes into a fool”* (17:10) and the sort of priorities a peaceful person has: *“Friends love through all kinds of weather, and families stick together in all kinds of trouble”* (17:17 MSG). The chapter ends with an astute observation that still resonates: *“He that hath knowledge spareth his words: and a man of understanding is of an excellent spirit. Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise: and he that shutteth his lips is esteemed a man of understanding”* (17:27,28).

**Prayer:** We thank you Lord that blessed are the peacemakers. Make me a channel of your peace; where there is hatred, let me bring your love.

## Day 18: The way of the fool (18:2)

*“A fool hath no delight in understanding, but that his heart may discover itself.”*

or *“Fools care nothing for thoughtful discourse; all they do is run off at the mouth”* (MSG). It has been said that the world can be divided into three camps: fools, villains and the good guys and all of us take in elements from each, in varying proportions. For Solomon, there are just two categories: the fools (that also included villains (or the wicked)) and the wise (i.e. the good guys). One major theme of Proverbs was to present the stark choice we all need to make between following the way of foolishness and that of wisdom, giving numerous, graphic examples of what each entail and the outcomes of our choices. 78 of the 189 references to “fool” in the Bible are found in the Book of Proverbs. Clearly, the way wisdom is the one to be commended and it begins with the fear of the Lord. In today’s text, we see one of many examples of how the fool acts and one no doubt we have observed and perhaps have been guilty of, setting out our own erroneous opinions and shutting out any challenge that we could be wrong.

Further texts in this chapter, specifically citing the fool, his ways and his end are: *“A fool hath no delight in understanding, but that his heart may discover itself ... A fool's lips enter into contention, and his mouth calleth for strokes. A fool's mouth is his destruction, and his lips are the snare of his soul”* (18:2,6-7).

Other examples of foolish behaviour are: *“The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly. He also that is slothful in his work is brother to him that is a great waster”* (18:8,9). Then we see foolish and wise behaviour and their consequences contrasted: *“Before destruction the heart of man is haughty, and before honour is humility. He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him”*

(16:12,13). But wisdom always wins through: *“The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe ... The heart of the prudent getteth knowledge; and the ear of the wise seeketh knowledge”* (8:10,15). After laying down the challenge of following the way of wisdom, we end our thought for today with some NT wisdom as to how we might now proceed: *“If you don’t know what you’re doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You’ll get his help, and won’t be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought. People who “worry their prayers” are like wind-whipped waves. Don’t think you’re going to get anything from the Master that way, adrift at sea, keeping all your options open”* (James 1:5-8 MSG).

**Prayer:** Dear Lord and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways. Thank you that the way of the wise and the way of the fool have been so clearly set out in your Word. May we ever choose the way of wisdom and look to you for it.

## Day 19: Concerning the poor (19:1)

*“Better is the poor that walketh in his integrity, than he that is perverse in his lips, and is a fool.”*

As usual, today’s chapter has lots of good stuff we are not even going to look at. But there is an important theme here that is referred to elsewhere in Proverbs – that of dealing with the poor and what to make out of poverty. While poverty is not something most of us would long for, unless taking the vow of poverty (and chastity and obedience, also relevant to how we might live), Solomon, who ironically was very rich, could see the value of being poor if the price to pay for keeping one’s integrity, having noted how riches (not wrong in itself) could lead one off the straight path, especially if it is a result of bribes or ill-gotten gain.

He observes the obvious: people don’t want to have anything to do with those who are poor, even if intreated by them, but will chase after the rich: *“Wealth maketh many friends; but the poor is separated from his neighbour ... All the brethren of the poor do hate him: how much more do his friends go far from him? he pursueth them with words, yet they are wanting to him”* (19:4,7). There is a popular song titled *“Money can’t buy me love”* and, who knows, the Beatles could have got their inspiration from Solomon: *“House and riches are the inheritance of fathers: and a prudent wife is from the Lord”* (19:14). As for how we should respond, the answer is clear and it comes with a reward: *“He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord; and that which he hath given will he pay him again”* (19:17). As for us, our text is reiterated: *“The desire of a man is his kindness: and a poor man is better than a liar”* (19:22).

Proverbs has a lot more to say about the poor and poverty but, in rounding off today’s thought, we jump to the end, on what appears to be a sensible balance between riches and poverty: *“Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the Lord? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain”* (30:8,9). Then a final exhortation: *“Open thy mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy”* (31:9). We end quoting Jesus, himself quoting Isaiah: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised”* Luke 4:18 and *“Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God”* Luke 6:20.

**Prayer:** May we never despise the poor. Thank you, Lord, you love to bless the poor. May we be content with our lot, recognising integrity is all what matters.

## Day 20: The pure in heart (20:9)

*“Who can say, I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?”*

For someone who truly follows the Lord, a verse like this can hit one like a bolt out of the blue. The natural tendency is to take the moral high ground, even if we are wrong. After all, such a person fears the Lord and seeks righteousness such that his aim is for his actions to be, rather than a mixture of pure and impure, only pure. Yet our text does not qualify “who” is referred to, so we can take it personally and face up to the reality that even with our most noble and doing it for the glory of God and the good of others motives, there is always the possibility of an element of impurity creeping, and if nothing else it should keep us humble and take us off our “holy” high horse when challenged. Looking at the context (verse before and verse after), we read *“Leaders who know their business and care keep a sharp eye out for the shoddy and cheap, or who among us can be trusted to be always diligent and honest? Switching price tags and padding the expense account are two things God hates”* (20:8-10 MSG). Both the before and after verses refer to what purity looks like in real terms: in our business dealings we must give of our best and be honest in all what we do.

Related texts on this theme to be found in our chapter include: *“Most men will proclaim every one his own goodness: but a faithful man who can find?”* (20:6), suggesting that our focus should be on being loyal and loving rather than merely talking about it. Then we are told a sober truth of how one is known by what one does, and while it is to do with children it could well apply to anyone of us: *“Even a child is known by his doings, whether his work be pure, and whether it be right”* (20:11). Finally, an even more sober truth is how God is in charge of human life, and watches and examines us inside and out: *“The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord, searching all the inward parts of the belly”* (20:27).

But we wrap up our thoughts on the importance of purity with a quote from the OT: *“Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully* (Psalm 24:3,4). And one from the NT, part of Jesus teachings referred to as the beatitudes: *“Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God”* Matthew 5:8. In both our verses we are told that the reward of a pure heart is we shall see God, and that ought to be our aim.

**Prayer:** Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. We thank you Lord that all your ways are pure. Cleanse us from all impurity, even if the refining process is a painful one, so that our hearts may be pure.

## Day 21: A good leader (21:1)

*“The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.”*

The first thing to say is today's text is not about good leaders *per se*. It is about kings, which in OT times were rulers of empires, nations and sometimes cities. Moreover, any king, the bad as well as the good. Proverbs has a lot to say about kings. While not using terms like “leader” it does talk about leadership qualities, typically associated with the wise. In today's chapter, the notion of the heart is further developed: *“Every way of a man is right in his own eyes: but the Lord pondereth the hearts”* (21:2) and something to expect from kings: *“To do justice and judgment is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice”* (21:3). And to complement: *“By me (wisdom) kings reign, and princes decree justice”* (8:15).

Today's meditation was written on the day USA inaugurated its 46<sup>th</sup> President. Few would dispute there are wide differences between POTUS 45 and 46 and many will have strong views on their relative merits. What is relevant as far as today's text goes, made here more explicit, is: *“Good leadership is a channel of water controlled by God; he directs it to whatever ends he chooses”* (MSG). It seems an incredible and unlikely notion that God controls the hearts of kings, directing them in the way he will, especially when the history of the world is littered with examples of bad kings who inflicted untold evil on their subjects. Our experience in the world of politics and business is the poor candidate may get promoted to positions of power and the good may get left behind. Ours is not to dispute God, but pray: *“I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty”* (1 Timothy 2:1,2). Righteous and godly are not the words that spring to mind when we think of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4), Cyrus (Isaiah 45), Jehu (2 Kings 9), but these were influential kings whose hearts were in the hands of the Lord, who accomplished many of His purposes, regardless.

While on the subject of good leaders, what about us? Maybe the circumstances of life put us firmly in “the led” camp. Yet we can lead by example, following the way of wisdom and be blessed: *“The king's favour is toward a wise servant”* (14:25), *“Righteous lips are the delight of kings”* (16:13), *“He that loveth pureness of heart, for the grace of his lips the king shall be his friend”* (22:11), *“Seest thou a man diligent in his business? he shall stand before kings”* (22:29).

**Prayer:** We pray for kings and those in authority Lord. We thank you the king's heart is in your hand. Whatever our station in life, may we be good and wise.

## Day 22: A good name (22:1)

*“A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold.”*

We come to the end of Solomon himself putting together his wise sayings and from 22:17 onwards we find him putting together a compendium of sayings of the wise. Our text today is about the importance of having a good name, even more important than lots of possessions. While some may care little for a good reputation, for Solomon this matters more than anything and we can all think of the tragedy that ensues when a person loses his good name. Our text ties in with *“Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart: So shalt thou find favour and good understanding in the sight of God and man”* (3:3,4) and *“Blessings are upon the head of the just: but violence covereth the mouth of the wicked. The memory of the just is blessed: but the name of the wicked shall rot”* (10:6,7). Both take the view that earning a reputation for living the good life, while alive and when dead, matters more than anything else. Tying in with the theme of a good name and what truly matters is: *“By humility and the fear of the Lord are riches, and honour, and life”* (22:4). Regarding the ending of this section, someone once did write: “The king, the wicked, the mocker, the wise, the proud, the diligent, the sluggard, the false witness, the guilty, the innocent, the rich, the poor, the prudent, the generous, the wife, the adulteress and the child all come on stage for a final curtain-call! And so does ‘The Righteous One’ ‘The Lord’ and ‘The Maker.’”

We begin our section of other wise sayings on a confident and entreating note: *“Bow down thine ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply thine heart unto my knowledge ... That thy trust may be in the Lord”* (22:17,19). We see again how important truth is: *“Have not I written to thee excellent things in counsels and knowledge, That I might make thee know the certainty of the words of truth; that thou mightest answer the words of truth to them that send unto thee?”* (22:20,21) We are reminded again of our obligations to the less well off: *“Rob not the poor, because he is poor: neither oppress the afflicted in the gate: For the Lord will plead their cause”* (22:22,23). We are warned: *“Make no friendship with an angry man; and with a furious man”* (22:24). We are reminded of the need for wisdom in our dealings: *“Be not thou one of them that strike hands, or of them that are sureties for debts”* (22:26) and how to treat others: *“Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set”* (22:28).

**Prayer:** We thank you Lord for the wisdom of Solomon and the wise. May we not lose our good name though folly, even if we lose our possessions. May we put doing the right thing high on our list, who loves truth and our neighbour.

## **Day 23: Buy the truth (23:23)**

*“Buy the truth, and sell it not; also wisdom, instruction, and understanding.”*

These sayings of the wise do well to complement those of Solomon, touching on many key themes seen earlier and provide fresh insights into others. We have a warning against gluttony, especially if in influential company (23:1-3). We are told not to spend our energies getting rich (23:4-5). We need to beware of the tight-fisted person (23:6-8). We are told not to waste our time engaging with fools (23:9) We must not stealthily move back the boundary lines or cheat orphans out of their property (23:10-11) tying in with one idea behind *“Remove not the ancient landmark”* (22:28), that of preserving the godly heritage passed down through generations. We must give ourselves to disciplined instruction (23:12), not be afraid to correct our young ones (including if needed the use of corporal punishment) – for a wise child will make one happy parent (23:13-16). We are not to envy *“sinners”* but rather to fear God (23:17-18) (a thought we will return to tomorrow). We are (or at least *“my son”* is) told again to avoid the loose woman (23:26-28). Then there is some graphically illustrated counsel of why we must not drink too much wine and get drunk (23:19-21) and (23:29-35).

Which leads us to our text for today *“Buy truth – don’t sell it for love or money; buy wisdom, buy education, buy insight”* (23:23 MSG). The follow on to this is also relevant given that the writer is keen to pass this onto his children and as a thought for those who are parents this should be our priority too: *“The father of the righteous shall greatly rejoice: and he that begetteth a wise child shall have joy of him. Thy father and thy mother shall be glad, and she that bare thee shall rejoice”* (23:24,25). Truth is up there with wisdom and righteousness in terms of importance as far as Proverbs is concerned and, interestingly, is linked three times with mercy, reminding us there is a balance to be had and of the one who was full of grace and truth (John 1:14). We noted in the previous chapter the importance attached to truth: *“That I might make thee know the certainty of the words of truth; that thou mightest answer the words of truth to them that send unto thee?”* (22:21) Earlier on in Proverbs we were told: *“Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart”* (3:3). While wanting to keep with the non-moralising tone of Proverbs, we still do well to take up the challenge to seek truth in all aspects of our lives making truth our priority in everything we do and follow Him who is the Truth.

**Prayer:** We are so grateful Jesus you are the Truth, are full of truth and you told us that the Truth will set us free. May we seek after and live out truth, whatever the cost, and in a world full of falsehood and deception, help us to discern truth.

## **Day 24: Do not envy evil men (24:1)**

*“Be not thou envious against evil men, neither desire to be with them.”*

We can link that today’s text nicely with what we read yesterday: *“Let not thine heart envy sinners: but be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long. For surely there is an end; and thine expectation shall not be cut off”* (23:17).

Continuing, our wise man gives a good reason for not envying the bad guy, who for all his pretensions and ability to gain a following: *“for their heart studieth destruction, and their lips talk of mischief”* (24:2). He focuses our attention onto what truly matters – concerning how we need to build in our lives: *“Through wisdom is an house builded; and by understanding it is established”* (24:2). He then goes on to talk about the virtues of the wise and the rewards of the way of wisdom, comparing it with a critique of the way of the fool and the destructive end of foolishness. *“For a just man falleth seven times, and riseth up again: but the wicked shall fall into mischief”* (24:16). And just in case we miss the punch of today’s text, the points are further reinforced: *“Fret not thyself because of evil men, neither be thou envious at the wicked: For there shall be no reward to the evil man; the candle of the wicked shall be put out”* (24:19,20)

Today’s text ties in with an often repeated themes of the Psalms, which begins with: *“Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful”* Psalm 1:1. It seems the Psalmist, often David before he became king, was obsessed with the wicked; not only because of their attacks on the righteous but they seemed to get away with it, for example: *“Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb. Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. Delight thyself also in the Lord: and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass”* (37:1-5). The writer of the Psalms, like Proverbs, was all too well aware that the bad people attracted foolish people who flock to their side, often because they did thrive, at least for a season. The reality is that today the bad person is just as, if not more, likely to hold positions of influence and esteem than the good person. But the wise take a long-term view knowing that whatever the price they have to pay that walking in the way of wisdom is far better than even touching the way of the wicked.

**Prayer:** We are sorry Lord for the times we have envied and fretted ourselves over evil men. May we stand with the poor and the righteous because we know that is where your heart is. We thank you even when the just man falls he is able to get up. May we ever seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

## **Day 25: Be kind to your enemies (25:21,22)**

*“If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink: For thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head, and the Lord shall reward thee.”*

We are back with Solomon’s wisdom, but here is what was compiled under King Hezekiah, some 250 years later. Hezekiah was a standout good king, no doubt influenced by Solomon’s wisdom. As always, we find in this chapter lots of good stuff, some of which we will look at briefly before attending to our text for today. We begin by revisiting kings whose significance we can see again is important: *“It is the glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honour of kings is to search out a matter. The heaven for height, and the earth for depth, and the heart of kings is unsearchable”* (25:2,3) and *“Take away the wicked from before the king, and his throne shall be established in righteousness. Put not forth thyself in the presence of the king, and stand not in the place of great men”* (25:5,6) relate. There is pertinent wisdom concerning our dealings with our neighbours: *“Go not forth hastily to strive, lest thou know not what to do in the end thereof, when thy neighbour hath put thee to shame. Debate thy cause with thy neighbour himself; and discover not a secret to another”* (25:8,9). There are some timeless truths like: *“Withdraw thy foot from thy neighbour’s house; lest he be weary of thee, and so hate thee”* (25:17) and truths that always resonate: *“As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country”* (25:25). Then there are truths that are so profound because they encapsulate things we may have observed: *“A righteous man falling down before the wicked is as a troubled fountain, and a corrupt spring”* (25:26). And there is a lot more!

Being kind to our enemies is a theme that is picked up in the NT: *“Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good”* Romans 12:17-21. There is much to challenge us with this teaching – while we can point to scripture teaching that bad people will get their comeuppance, that is something for God, not us. Our kind response to an unkind action by someone who wrongs us, who we are aggrieved with, could lead him to repentance.

**Prayer:** we thank you for the example of our Lord Jesus Christ who forgave his enemies and taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Help us dear Lord to be kind to others, including those who have wronged us.

## Day 26: Dealing with fools (26:4)

*“Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him.”*

While today’s chapter brings out an assortment of important thoughts, there is an underlying theme – it is to do with the way of the fool and how to respond to him. The ideal response is encapsulated in today’s verse: *“Don’t respond to the stupidity of a fool; you’ll only look foolish yourself”* (MSG) and maybe to avoid him altogether. *“Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit”* (26:5) and if we do answer a fool it needs to be in simple terms so he doesn’t get conceited (26:6). We live in a world where folly abounds, maybe subtly. It is inevitable that ours and the paths of fools cross, so we need to know what to do. We need be on our look out to identify what that amounts to and, if we have to respond, find the best way to go about it. Our text provides the sort of advice, if we are honest, we ought to have taken in the past but may not have done so – when attempting answering a fool according to his folly, when the best approach might have been not to take the bait, and not make further ado.

The chapter begins reflecting how inappropriate it is to honour a fool (26:1) and also (26:8) – although sadly we live in a world where that happens all too often. As far as Solomon is concerned, a fool recycles silliness and cannot be trusted. For the rest of this chapter, he goes through different sorts of people, all of which we might place in the fool category. There are those who loaf around, finding excuses for their inaction (26:13-15). There are dreamers who fantasize their self-importance; who they think they are smarter than anyone else (26:16). There are those who interfere in other peoples’ quarrels (26:17). There are those who are parties to deception, shrugging it off as if it were nothing (26:18-19). There is the argumentative sort that invariably add fuel to the fire (26:21). There are listeners to and spreaders of gossip, and how much damage all that causes (26:20,22). There are those who smooth talk and appear friendly but behind the façade there is the intent to do people down (26:23-26). Then there are the malicious, whose malice invariably backfires (26:27), liars who hate their victims (26:28) and the flatterers who sabotage trust (26:28). Lessons we might learn from these observations could include that in this wonderful world in which we live there are those who would taint its wonder; folly can manifest itself in many sorts of ways; we need to beware of fools on our own doorstep; we must not be like them and, as well, take note that *“the great God that formed all things both rewardeth the fool, and rewardeth transgressors”* (26:10).

**Prayer:** as we go about our day-to-day business Lord, help us to avoid the way of the fool and deal with every instance of folly we find in the way that is best. Thank you for your word that teaches us the way of the wise we need to follow.

## **Day 27: Not boasting of tomorrow (27:1)**

*“Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.”*

Today’s chapter contains several blessed thoughts we cannot do justice to. What we will do is to consider our text, which reinforces an earlier similar thought: *“A man's heart deviseth his way: but the Lord directeth his steps”* (16:9) and two further texts; all three are often quoted. Most of us are guilty of boasting about tomorrow before it happens, thinking we have everything worked at and things will turn out as we hope for. As far as Solomon was concerned, that is foolishness, for we cannot predict what is going to happen and we all probably have found that what happens is not what we expect. The right approach is to live each moment for God. This is brought home in Jesus parable of a man who knocks down his barns to build bigger ones so eventually he can take it easy. He ends: *“But God said unto him, thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God”* Luke 9:16-21.

Our second text is: *“Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful”* (27:6), preceded by: *“Open rebuke is better than secret love”* (27:5). Friends who look out for us are precious, especially if their concern is such that they will tell us where we are going wrong if that is what we are doing. We ought to be thankful for that even if our initial response is to feel hurt. In contrast there are those who flatter us, even when we are doing wrong, because such actions are deceitful, and by continuing along such a path unchecked will no doubt be ruinous. We need to be the sort of friend that tells it as it is (caution: there are ways to do this) and to prize friends who do so to us. Our third text is: *“Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend”* (27:17). If we are going to be useful and effective in life and in God’s service, we need to be sharp and ready to respond, so we can handle whatever life throws up in the best possible way. There are ways to help achieve this, such as reading the Bible and prayer but another way is being encouraged by another person, and often this is something we can reciprocate. How often can we look back in gratitude when someone has spoken a timely word or done something that has somehow invigorated us when we needed it most. Just as earlier with the friend who puts us straight, even if it is wounding us, so we also can appreciate the friend who sharpens us, and we can be that friend to others.

**Prayer:** We thank you Lord you hold the keys to all unknown. May we never take for granted what we have or presume for the future. May we be a faithful friend who will tell things as they are and be an encourager to other people.

## Day 28: Righteous and wicked compared (28:1)

*“The wicked flee when no man pursueth: but the righteous are bold as a lion.”*

Just as Proverbs often contrasts the wise with the fool, it also does so with the righteous and the wicked. “Righteous” appears 75 times in Proverbs, 4 times in this chapter. “Wicked” appears 95 times in Proverbs, 5 times in this chapter. Three times, including today’s text, the righteous is compared with the wicked, and it is quite clear which camp we ought to be in. In another rendering of today’s text, we read: *“The wicked are edgy with guilt, ready to run off even when no one’s after them; Honest people are relaxed and confident, bold as lions”* (MSG). Whatever it is that is bugging the wicked, he is on edge, ready to flee at the slightest provocation, even at false alarms. This is in marked contrast to the righteous, who can confidently stand his ground whatever he is faced with. Seen in such a light it is clearly evident which camp we are better off in.

Our second compare is: *“When righteous men do rejoice, there is great glory: but when the wicked rise, a man is hidden”* (28:12) or *“When good people are promoted, everything is great, but when the bad are in charge, watch out!”* (MSG). What is being observed is a simple fact and one we would have seen, maybe many times. Too often the baddies get to the top and the goodies left behind and the result is misery. The opposite is true when good people are promoted and bad people demoted. In God’s kingdom that will be so. Our third compare is: *“When the wicked rise, men hide themselves: but when they perish, the righteous increase”* (28:28) or *“When corruption takes over, good people go underground, but when the crooks are thrown out, it’s safe to come out”* (MSG). Corruption in government at any level is a horribly evident thing and is something if one had any sense they will want to avoid and counter. But if corruption is rooted out, people can breathe a sigh of relief. In line with his non-moralising tone, Solomon doesn’t follow up by calling for a righteous crusade to promote good people and root out corruption, possibly realising for most of us our power to do so is limited. But we can be those who feature among the righteous, who the Lord will surely honour in His time. It is clear the people we should be: *“He that is of a proud heart stirreth up strife: but he that putteth his trust in the Lord shall be made fat. He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool: but whoso walketh wisely, he shall be delivered. He that giveth unto the poor shall not lack: but he that hideth his eyes shall have many a curse”* (25:25-27).

**Prayer:** We thank you again Lord you set out what happens with the wicked and the righteous. We pray for righteous government and for corruption to be rooted out. Help us to follow the path of righteousness for your name’s sake.

## **Day 29: The fear of man (29:25)**

*“The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe.”*

As we approach the end of Proverbs and before handing over to two “guest” wise men, we round off the sayings of Solomon with lots of timely repetition. Today we will do a quick recap before ending with our thought for the day. We begin with the reoccurring theme of reproof and discipline. Firstly, as applies to us personally: *“He, that being often reprov’d hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy”* (29:1). Secondly, about the bringing up of children (modern day parents take note): *“The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame ... Correct thy son, and he shall give thee rest; yea, he shall give delight unto thy soul”* (29:15, 17). We consider kings and rulers, reminding us again why we want them to be good and wise: *“When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice: but when the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn ... The king by judgment establisheth the land: but he that receiveth gifts overthroweth it ... If a ruler hearken to lies, all his servants are wicked ... The king that faithfully judgeth the poor, his throne shall be established for ever”* (29:2,4,12,14). There is more said in our chapter on themes covered earlier, notably contrasts: the wise and the fool, the righteous and the wicked, the angry and the peace loving, and the humble and the proud.

But before our text for today, another often quoted text is: *“Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he”* (29:18). Wouldn't it be lovely to see a new generation with the sort of vision to respond to: *“If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; But when they attend to what he reveals, they are most blessed”* (MSG). Yet we can be people with God's vision. So back to our text for today: *“The fear of human opinion disables; trusting in God protects you from that”* (MSG). Tragically, history and experience are littered with examples of people who have missed God's best because they fear what others think and have gone with the flow that is not what God had in mind. Thank God too for those who did what our text suggests and, as they trusted in God to protect them, they entered in the flow of God's stream. The challenge before us is to partner with God by being party to the vision He wants us to have and not to be deterred due to the fear of man.

**Prayer:** Lord, we are continually amazed by the precious truths that leap out of your Word. Help us be those who keep your law and own the vision you have for the peoples of the earth. We are sorry when we succumb to the fear of man and rather may we put our trust in you, knowing that in doing so we are safe.

### **Day 30: God's pure word (30:5)**

*“Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him.”*

Today's chapter are *“the words of Agur the son of Jakeh”* about whom we know little other than what his words reveal about him, insofar he appeared to be very humble (content with the quiet life, away from the limelight, and having just enough to get by in life) and very wise (given his insights into many things that are humanity and nature related that most people miss). He begins recognising how little he or anyone else knows about God: *“I neither learned wisdom, nor have the knowledge of the holy”* (30:3). In today's text, he makes a beautifully apt observation about God's word that we do well to heed. It is pure (unlike so much else we come across in life) and then throws in a related thought of God being a shield, i.e. a protector to those who trust in Him. He follows this up with a logical continuation that we must not add to God's word and thus adulterate it: *“Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar”* (30:6). In making his observation concerning purity, he reinforces what we learn in the Psalms: *“The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes”* Psalm 19:8 and *“Thy word is very pure: therefore thy servant loveth it”* Psalm 119:140. Just as Proverbs encourages wisdom over foolishness etc., it does purity over impurity.

Going back to his contentment, he prays for two things in life: *“Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the Lord? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain”* (30:8,9). While we do not expect folk to pray quite along these lines, we do well to take note. As for Agur's words that follow, as one commentator remarked: *“He begins with a frank observation of human wickedness (30:10-15a). Then his unique way of making vivid comparisons has seven main focuses: the pain of childlessness (30:15b-16), the disrespecting of parents (30:17), the mystery of romantic relationships (30:18-19), the shamelessness of adultery (30:20), the agony of an unloved wife (30:21-23), the various kinds of wisdom (30:24-28), and the slightly comic nature of human power! (30:29-31)”*. He ends as he begins, on a note of wise humility: *“If thou hast done foolishly in lifting up thyself, or if thou hast thought evil, lay thine hand upon thy mouth. Surely the churning of milk bringeth forth butter, and the wringing of the nose bringeth forth blood: so the forcing of wrath bringeth forth strife”* (30:32,33).

**Prayer:** Lord, we thank you every word you give is pure and you are a shield to those who trust in you. We thank you for people like Agur, who show humble contentment, and are able to discern your wisdom. May we too do likewise.

### **Day 31: A God-fearing woman (31:30)**

*“Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised”*

Today we come to the second of our guest contributors in this the last chapter of Proverbs and it is appropriate in a book written by a father for his son and aimed firstly at men, that the ladies have the last word, and they do so in more ways than one. Like with Agur, we know little of today’s author, Lemuel, other than he was a king who had been taught well by his mother, evidenced by the words that follow. He goes over ground already well covered – stay away from wanton women and don’t get drunk and then makes a profound point that will no doubt please those concerned about social justice: *“Open thy mouth for the dumb in the cause of all such as are appointed to destruction. Open thy mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy”* (31:8,9). We have noted already the key virtue of Proverbs – wisdom – is a lady. Along with the importance of the father’s teaching, on an equal footing is that of the mother.

But Proverbs ends (31:10-31) with reflecting on the subject of a wife of noble character. It does so by way of an acrostic poem (each line starting with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet) espousing some of the virtues discussed in earlier chapters. It attempts to answer the question, and at least suggests it is one any man looking for his partner in life should be asking: *“Who can find a virtuous woman?”* (31:10a) and then gives plenty of back up as to why he considers *“her price is far above rubies”* (31:10b). While we might wryly smile that women who get up early to organise the household servants may live on a different planet to the ones we are used to, yet have to agree she is pretty awesome and if those of us (who are unmarried men) find such a ruby, then we are blessed indeed. She is a hard worker and an astute, honest businesswoman. She is a good employer, gives generously to the poor, provides well for her household. Her husband has full confidence in her, her husband is respected at the “city gate” and her children arise and call her blessed (31:11,23,28). She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come; she speaks with wisdom, and gives faithful instruction (31:25-26). So Proverbs comes to an end, singing her praises and commending her virtues that far excel the mere outward show we too often see: *“Many women have done wonderful things, but you’ve outclassed them all! Charm can mislead and beauty soon fades. The woman to be admired and praised is the woman who lives in the Fear-of-God. Give her everything she deserves! Adorn her life with praises!”* (31:29-31 MSG)

**Prayer:** We thank you Lord for the many wonderful lessons we have learned in Proverbs. We thank you for the noble woman whose price is far above rubies.

## **Proving Proverbs**

One of the wonderful discoveries often made by lovers of the Bible is that, regardless of the number of times we read or refer to a particular passage, something fresh or new is likely to jump out the page, and this has been my experience throughout the period I have been preparing these 31 meditations in Proverbs. It often meant reading in two or more versions and then doing cross reference checks in order to get the right meaning and context, followed by a good deal of meditating – just as applicable here as with the Song of Songs.

Despite trying to be clever by attempting to cover all of Proverbs main points, having given myself 31 bites of cherry, I have no doubt I have failed and the challenge for readers is to find things I missed. As for discovering things afresh, as far as Proverbs went, it was my daily experience, despite thinking I knew the book pretty well, and then finding I did not. Then there was the experience of being tested on some point I had reflected on earlier, and finding sometimes I failed. Another beautifully odd experience was reading the chapter for the day in our family prayer times and finding something amazing, earlier missed. Yet another is discovering how often Proverbs is quoted in every day usage.

I would definitely recommend it if one were to include Proverbs in one's daily Bible reading routine, perhaps concentrating on one thought each day and doing so along with Psalms and the rest of the Bible. Irrespective of how many times one were to go round the block so to speak, there is likely something new to be found each time. Some of the great themes of life that ought to be of interest to an earnest follower of YHWH are discussed in Proverbs: fear of the Lord, truth, wisdom, humility, purity, knowledge, understanding, righteousness, discipline, industry etc. Such qualities are well worth having and, while it is no guarantee that life will run as smoothly as we might hope, as our study of the next wisdom book, Ecclesiastes, will show, we will be better off having these qualities, as will others, than not, and following the way of wisdom is far better than the way of foolishness that will ever want to draw us in, along with its disastrous effects.

There is a down to earthiness about Proverbs, and an absence of religion and pretention, I found so refreshing. I sense it was because the writers aim was for readers to find true wisdom, and while directed to Solomon's son, whoever we are and whatever our station in life, if we are serious about fearing the Lord etc., we will want to get wisdom and what matters in life, by following its teachings. Given Proverbs is a practical rather than airy-fairy book, covering real issues, we can identify what is written with today. Taking heed of what is taught will put us in good stead in facing the challenges of life, in both the big and little things. The challenge for we the reader is to prove Proverbs for ourselves.