

## **Week 1 sermon –1<sup>st</sup> March**

**Theme: True wisdom and training in wisdom**

**Readings: Proverbs 8:10-16 & 22-31 & Matt. 4:1-11**

In our modern world, we're used to one-liners like "L and P: World Famous in Paeroa or New Zealand" or "an Apple a day keeps the Doctor away". We can equally use Proverbs as sound-bites to quote or misquote (like "God helps those who help themselves"). However, Proverbs are more than memorable sayings; they are key truths that help us make good choices, build character and live a better life.

Importantly, wisdom ensures that our choices build closer relationships with God and with others. Therefore, we must get beyond the idea that Proverbs provides a self-help handbook and discover the power of wisdom in our work, marriage, and family. Then Proverbs can assist us to make tough decisions when being good, or moral, isn't enough. In those situations, we need wisdom. There's no better place to find wisdom than the book of Proverbs which is our focus during Lent.

The background

Before we explore the meaning of wisdom, let's set the context for Proverbs. The opening verse states:

These are the proverbs  
of King Solomon of Israel,  
the son of David.

This is consistent with 1 King 4 which says "[God] blessed [Solomon] with insight and wisdom" (verse 29) and "[Solomon] wrote three thousand wise sayings" (verse 32). Therefore, there's a link between Solomon's wisdom and Proverbs. However Proverbs also includes other contributors; for example, who you'll encounter Agur in your study groups this week. However, there's no compelling reason to doubt that Solomon was the predominant author and patron. Solomon's sayings were probably compiled during Hezekiah's reign.

Proverbs 25:1

25 These ... proverbs of Solomon, compiled by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah:

### **WHAT IS A PROVERB?**

While proverbs are found throughout both Testaments, the book of Proverbs contains the greatest compilation of wisdom teaching. These proverbs include pithy statements that explore how to build relationships; who to associate with and who to avoid. They describe the kind of people we ought to be and become. We should speak the truth and not lie, walk in humility and not pride, practice diligence and generosity not laziness and greed. However, proverbs do more than increase our understanding, they're intended to provoke a response that develops character.

These character traits help us to make decisions in difficult settings. Proverbs also encourage churches to become communities of character where the truth is spoken, generosity is practiced and peace is maintained.

Therefore Proverbs aren't just self-help principles and best practices; they're intended encourage obedience to God because they mirror God's character and

word. Consequently, there are links to the OT; honour your father and mother (in Exodus and Deuteronomy) become the Proverb 10:1

Children with good sense  
make their parents happy,  
but foolish children  
make them sad.

Equally there are parallels between Jesus' teaching and Proverbs. As we read today  
"No one can live only on food.

People need every word  
that God has spoken."

Importantly, as we've seen in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus states that it's not enough to simply tick "no murder or adultery this week! Yeah, righteous". True discipleship requires a transformed heart. Equally, through the transformational power of the Spirit within us, we should expect to see wisdom in our own lives as we discern and follow the Spirit's leading.

### The form of Proverbs

As we will see Proverbs is written in three sections –

1. Part 1, to the end of chapter 9, is an introduction and opening instructions. They appear as sayings spoken by teachers or parents to young men leaving home (hence the references to "my son"). As parents of boys, we've probably all hoped and prayed that they'll mature and grasp the responsibility of adult life, right – well that's Proverbs.
2. From chapter 10 to chapter 22:16 we have collections of "words of the wise" that focus on particular words or themes such as humility and pride.
3. The text finishes with extra instructions, sentences and poems (like the beautiful poem of the virtuous woman in Chapter 31).

As you will discover, the themes (like anger or envy) are scattered throughout Proverbs. We therefore, must be careful when reading one text in isolation. For example, if we just read Proverb 10:4, we might conclude that laziness causes poverty

Laziness leads to poverty;  
hard work makes you rich.

However, Proverbs 22:16 make it clear that oppression and lack of opportunity also contribute to poverty.

Cheat the poor to make profit  
or give gifts to the rich—  
either way you lose.

We must therefore be careful assuming that isolated Proverbs provide proof text or promises that God must fulfil "I've worked hard, so God I deserve to win Powerball!"  
What is wisdom?

Let's explore Proverbs chapter 8 using 4 themes

1. **the importance of wisdom,**
2. **the definition of wisdom,**
3. **the problem of wisdom,**
4. **And a clue to the solution.**

If we return to the first 2 verses, we see the importance of Wisdom;

<sup>10</sup> Choose my instruction rather than silver,  
and knowledge rather than pure gold.

<sup>11</sup> For wisdom is far more valuable than rubies.  
Nothing you desire can compare with it.

Here, Wisdom is speaking and saying “I am more important than silver, gold or precious jewels.” In fact, wisdom is more valuable than anything we desire. Sadly, only a few of us ever achieve **THE** fame, fortune and beauty we might dream of, but wisdom provides the ability to flourish regardless of our circumstances. In fact, we probably know people who, on the surface, have enormous ability, and charisma who falter; while others who seems less skilled thrive. Indeed, we’ve found that one critical factor in building successful leaders in aid work, - how well we build relationships and work with others. Both of these aspects depend on wisdom.

#### Definition

Wisdom isn’t the same thing as moral goodness; there’s a connection but they aren’t identical. Obviously being **UNETHICAL** is disastrous; most secular business schools tell us “be ethical”; moral failings can be fatal. But Wisdom is much more than being ethical. Helping a poor family out of debt is wonderful; but it can makes things worse. Several years ago a homeless man visited our church with a compelling story – he had a chance to rent a house and leave homelessness behind. So, I drove him to meet his landlord, ready to pay the bond. When we met the supposed landlord, I discovered there was no lease. His friend and he just needed money. If I had paid the money, I’m not sure what the money would have been used for. Without wisdom, I could have made things worse. Being a person of high principle isn’t enough, we have to be wise. More importantly, for the vast majority of issues we face, the rules don’t help. Do you get married? What career should you take? Should I move to another town? Should I confront someone’s behaviour? These situations don’t necessarily involve morality or knowledge; you need wisdom.

What then is wisdom? Verse 12 – 14 states.

“I, Wisdom, live together with good judgment.  
I know where to discover knowledge and discernment.  
... I hate pride and arrogance,  
corruption and perverse speech.  
Common sense and success belong to me.  
Insight and strength are mine.

So let’s explore these passages – wisdom requires insight and discernment. One of my favourite novels are murder mysteries. I enjoy how Sherlock Holmes examines a crime scene and see clues to what’s happened. Equally, Gerhard von Rad, a scholar on Proverbs, says that Wisdom is defined as;

“Competence with regard to the realities and complexities of life. Knowing how things are, how they happen and what to do...”

The fact that it’s not enough to follow ethical rules, creates a dilemma for us; too often as churches we’re missed the point by focussing on being morally good and not wise. The depth of our spiritual problem becomes clear from verse 23.

I was appointed in ages past,  
at the very first, before the earth began.  
I was born before the oceans were created ....  
Before the mountains were formed,...  
I was the architect at [God's] side.

Wisdom says "I was there when everything was made". This account of wisdom is unique. In the ancient world, the physical world was an accident or it resulted from the power struggle between the gods. But in Proverbs, wisdom is described as an artist, who designed the world as a place of beauty and order, joy and peace. This means that Wisdom is the very pattern built into God's creation and reality. We all know that there are patterns to the physical world, right. If we step off a cliff what happens? We fall. Do you know what's different when a Christian steps off a cliff? **NOTHING!** Proverbs 8 indicates that there's also a fabric or pattern to our relationships and our spiritual reality; if we miss these we will equally fall. So, foolishness involves going against God's spiritual and social patterns and asserting that moral rules are irrelevant. There are moral absolutes, if we don't follow them, we're being foolish.

But there's the flip side. Proverbs tells us "if you work hard you will prosper, if you're lazy you'll be poor"; "if you live a moral life, everything will go well; if not, it won't". We all might be tempted to respond – "yeah, that's what I'm talking about!" So, when Job's friends see him suffering, what do they say? Job you must have done something wrong. This is because they foolishly believe that they know it all. But, in chapter 16, we see exceptions. Some people who live by God's absolutes have a tough life. So, if we think you know everything we also lack wisdom. We must accept two things:

1. God's ordained patterns determine how life works.
2. AND we cannot know them all!

There is a solution... did you notice wisdom is an "I"; a person. What if this isn't just poetic? What if wisdom was a person and if we knew this person that made us wise? In the inter-testamentary book;

Sirach 51:23-27 we read

<sup>23</sup> Draw near to me ... lodge in the house of instruction.

... <sup>26</sup> Put your neck under her yoke,  
and let your souls receive instruction;  
it is to be found close by.

<sup>27</sup> See with your own eyes that I have laboured but little  
and found for myself much serenity.

Do these words sound familiar?

Imagine how the first-century listeners responded when Jesus said;

**Matthew 11:28-30**

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; ... and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Notice the similarities? Jesus says here, “I am the wisdom of God you’re looking for; come to me and I will make you wise.” Wisdom therefore isn’t ultimately about knowledge or principles, it involves learning the way to true wisdom from Jesus. So, John’s gospel opens with these words; “In the beginning was the Word (logos) or wisdom and the wisdom was with God and the wisdom was God.” John is telling us that in the beginning God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, had a perfect relationship based on mutual love and wisdom. Out of that connection all creation including humanity was made. Life isn’t a power struggle or an accident; we’re called to perfect relationships that parallels the Trinity. In fact, God provides us with a manual in human form; Jesus says I am the wisdom of God in person to you, for you and with you.

No matter where you are in your faith journey, read the gospels – see Jesus’ actions, behaviours and wisdom. Jesus is more than a prophet who provides wise words. Jesus says “I have come to live the life you should have lived and die the death you should have died because I know you can’t be wise on your own”. Jesus did this so we can truly see and accept who we are as God’s beloved children. So if you are truly seeking or struggling with wisdom, our journey to find wisdom ends with Jesus. His words to us are simple; “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

Let us pray. Help us to grasp our need for Wisdom and discover in Jesus that true wisdom that only comes from knowing him. Show us as individuals how to see, know and follow Jesus and to be wise and conformed to his likeness. Help us as a church to be a community of character. In Jesus name Amen.