

PROVERBS



Everyone wants to live the good life. Just go to the bookstore and you will discover that the self-help section continues to grow. Amazon promotes hundreds of books that promise a better life. Five tips, four steps, seven days to a better you – they are all around us. Around the corner from Indigo in north London is Goodlife Fitness – the promise that you can have a good life with a good looking chiselled body.

The problem we face is that we want a formula for the good life. We want to programmatize it, systematize it. So when we come to the book of Proverbs, we like it. It offers tweet-length pieces of advice for how we can reduce stress, balance the budget, and get kids to be good. We want the drive-thru approach to spirituality, and Proverbs seems to offer it with quick little pointers. We can just memorize one little verse and pick and choose what is helpful for us in the moment.

But if we approach Proverbs just to improve our lives and take little nuggets of gold without doing the hard work of getting to know the source of the good life, we will find that we are frustrated and that others frustrate us. Proverbs is great in giving us little individual sayings. Yes, they will help us if we apply them because all truth is God's truth. But Proverbs is intended to help us to know and love God himself and all of his wisdom. So Proverbs is incredibly practical, and for a good reason. It knows that you can know theology and yet still live poorly. The law says "You shall not kill," but the wisdom of Proverbs knows that you can have the command and still fail to keep it by not loving your brother. The law can say, "Remember to keep the Sabbath," but the insight of Proverbs knows that you can stop working but still fail to find rest for your soul. God's Law can tell us what is right and wrong, but Proverbs gives us common sense approaches to life that look at the world and see that God has embedded into his creation rhythms and patterns and order that we need to observe and apply in order to experience the blessings of his instructions.

So we open to Proverbs 9:10-12 and we read: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life. If you are wise, you are wise for yourself, if you scoff, you alone will bear it." And in these verses we hear a summary of the good life. I find it helpful to ask questions when I read the Bible, so this morning I want to ask two questions to help us understand Proverbs.

What are the paths offered for the good life?

In Proverbs 9:12, we hear that there are competing paths offered for the good life. There is wisdom, and there is scoffing. Proverbs doesn't gloss over the fact that everyone wants a good life. It makes it clear that there are competing paths to the good life. Twice in Proverbs, once in 14:12 and another in 16:25, Proverbs warns us that there is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death. This leads me to ask the question, how do we know if we are on the path of life or death?

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Proverbs gives us the vision of the good life as offered by two women. One is the Wise Woman and she leads all who follow her down the path of life. The other is the Loose Lady, or Lady Folly, and she will take all who follow her down the path of death.

These two women reminds us of how God created a garden and put two trees in it – the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that looked good but would lead you to death. Adam and Eve were told to let God's wisdom lead them so that they would become wise and live with God and eat from the tree of life.

But another voice called them – questioning the voice of wisdom, listen to their own truth, define their own truth, and this was the voice of the serpent, the voice of the Loose Lady. Adam and Eve turned their backs away from wisdom and turned to folly, and this opened the door to death, separating them from the source of life, the tree of life, and the voice of life.

The purpose of Proverbs is to take us back to life, back to life, back to Eden. And the primary way that Proverbs tunes our ears to wisdom is to hear how God's truth applies through short little sayings apply to everyday life. And what God's ways looks like is vitality, joy, favour, and life forever with God back in the Garden of Eden. This is why the Wise Woman isn't just giving good advice, but she is leading us back to the way of life.

Alongside the Wise Woman is the Loose Lady, the Lady of Folly. She called adulterous, forbidden, smooth. She lures people away with offering promise, ease, and fame. But her path leads to the grave.

Just as Adam and Eve turned from the wisdom of God and followed the voice of the serpent, any time we turn from God's definitions of wisdom and truth and righteousness, any time we try to find pleasure in places where God has forbidden, we are taking the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and we swallow the lies of foolishness. Living apart from God is to live in folly because we are living apart from the tree of life.

Doing right is not our default position. We don't listen to wisdom naturally. So the Wise Woman is not a dainty woman, but she is out in the street calling out loudly trying to snatch us from folly. But people are seduced by pleasure, ease, and fame of the Loose Lady, our natural inclination is to go to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil instead of the tree of life.

What is the path of wisdom?

If there are two paths – one leading to life and the other death, how do we know if we are on the path of wisdom? Proverbs 9:10 gives us a clear indication. It takes the summary of the book from 1:7 and tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. But in its classic fashion, Proverbs uses rhyming thoughts to explain what terms mean. If we were to think that

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the fear of the Lord meant being scared of God and running and hiding from him like Adam and Eve did, we would misunderstand the fear of the Lord.

Instead, Proverbs defines it in 9:10b – the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. The goal of wisdom is not so that you would live an easy, prosperous life of fame and success, but that you would know God.

God is the creator of all things, and so he has embedded into his creation his very wisdom. Wisdom is all around us, calling out. We can look at creation and see patterns of life. God has put into his creation his wisdom so that we would turn to him and know him. This does not mean that we can just look at creation, become wise, and follow God; rather, we look at creation, see his patterns of wisdom, and if we have ears to hear, we will turn to the source of all wisdom – God's instructions or God's law. God's wisdom in creation is not contradictory to his saving instruction of his special revelation of his torah (instruction) in Scripture. Instead, as folly leads us down the path of death, God's wisdom calls out and offers us hope of life.

The despair of folly and death ought to lead us to see that we need to be rescued. But if we just look for a quick sound byte, four steps to a better life, a life hack, we will continually be frustrated. God's wisdom calls out to us because we all crave rescuing from futility, meaninglessness, dissatisfaction – ultimately death. All of this is why the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. To fear God is not to be afraid of him that we should have to hide. It is to revere him, to trust him, to look to him for the source of all life. We cannot find sufficient wisdom in creation to give us life. Yes, we can find wisdom in creation to help us live better, but we will still be frustrated by death. Instead, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of life. Why? Because the fear of the Lord is Proverbs' way of speaking about repentance and faith.

Instead of trusting in our own instincts, instead of thinking that we know the right path, instead of being self-confident, Proverbs teaches us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Why? Because fearing God is to trust in the Lord with all of our hearts and not lean on our own understanding. It's acknowledging God in all of our ways who makes our paths straight (Prov. 3:5-6). It is learning who God is, what his path of life is like, and hearing his call and following him. Because Proverbs is intended to call out and enable us to...

See the Wisdom of Christ

To understand how we will see the wisdom of Christ, we first need to understand that the book of Proverbs was written by Solomon and compiled by others who wanted to create a training manual for Israel's kings and nobles. Solomon was Israel's wisest king, a man who 1 Kings 4:29-34 tells us had many sayings and collected wisdom from his renaissance nature.

While Solomon was Israel's wisest king, what seems to have happened was that Solomon had written some instructions for his son and those who would take the throne. So chapters 1-9 are

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the instructions for the future kings of Israel in a systematic fashion. They function as the introduction to the book. The rest of the book are many of Solomon's sayings that were collected, along with a few other wise sayings from Agur and Lemuel. So we will go through chapters 1-9 first, then turn to various topics throughout the book. As a preparation manual for ruling well, Proverbs was to guide kings to do what Adam was to do – go to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, seek the wisdom of the Lord, and apply the torah or instruction of God to all of life.

But Israel's kings would fail to apply this wisdom and would follow the Loose Lady, leading to the destruction of the kingdom and the loss of kings. But God's wisdom would prevail over folly. Wisdom would not just stay as an idea, but would become a human. The voice of God would become like us and walk among us – Jesus is Proverbs made alive. He spoke, walked, lived, and died to show us the way of life and the path of the wise. He refused folly that snared everyone else. He earned the Tree of life by walking the path of life, which men of folly hated. And so they crucified him. But by going to the tree of death, he brought us to the tree of life so that we can escape the Loose Lady's grip and her folly, finding life instead. And so he nourishes us with life.

We all are called to follow the path of the Loose Lady to pleasure, ease, and fame. But Jesus does what the Wise Woman says – Jesus comes to fools like us and pours out his wisdom by his Spirit. As Paul can say, He is the source of your life, the very wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:30). He came and ruled as the most faithful King to show us that there is a noble King who came to rule and lead us back to Eden – to the tree of life. If you want to know what Wisdom is like, you look at Jesus Christ, who lived and died to give us the Spirit of wisdom so that we can walk down the path of the Tree of Life.

So if you're lacking wisdom, James says you should ask of God, who gives wisdom generously (Jas 1:5), and the wisdom that God gives is the wisdom of Christ that came down from heaven so that you could live pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere lives (Jas 3:17).

So let's join together on the most practical of all books and find God's wisdom. And you might just discover that the sound bytes and tweets and self-help books aren't very satisfying to get you to the better life. For Jesus offers us a feast of wisdom in a world that settles for fast food drive thru tips, and his path isn't the quick and easy path that is a false version of life – his wisdom is the gourmet meal, the banquet spread before you that will satisfy your soul in the good and hard days, leading you to the good life.