Family
Proverbs 31:10-12, 28-30

This is our last look at the Book of Proverbs, and once we're done you might be glad about that! Because we're going to see what Proverbs - a book written to help you and me learn how to navigate life with skill - has to say about husbands and wives and what you should look for and how you should be one. *And* how you should raise your kids. So nothing controversial! This is going to be like taking a Sunday morning stroll through a minefield!

Because if marriage and family can be a huge blessing in our lives, they can also be a huge heartache, can't they? So, it makes sense that if Proverbs wants to teach us how to live wisely it's going to open the front door on our homes and our most intimate relationships, and say, 'let's take a look.'

And the Bible repeatedly highlights how marriage and family are crucial to our own wellbeing, but also to the wellbeing of society. And arguably, some of our governments and secular academics are having to play catch up with that. Brad Wilcox, Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia has recently published a book called Get Married; the subtitle of which reads: why Americans must defy the elites, forge strong families, and save civilisation.

And in case you think that's hyperbole, the data is clear, he says, however uncomfortable it might make academics like himself feel. The key to personal happiness is not making money, or living for yourself, but having a good marriage. And that children brought up in such a marriage do better across just about every measure.

And it's not just about saving American civilisation. You may have seen in the press last week the latest figures for marriage and birth rates in South Korea which are falling through the floor. So much so that, at this rate, the population will have halved by 2100, with all the security and economic implications of that. Or take the recent *votations* here in Switzerland. The problem with the pension situation is not just that people are living longer, it's that less children are being born. Or think of gang related crimes and the well documented role that the absence of fathers plays in that.

So marriage and having kids and how we raise them matters at national and international levels. But it also matters at the level of our hearts and homes.

For example, if you're single, how hard should you try and get married? And if you try, what sort of partner should you be looking for? Or, if you *are* married, how are you supposed to treat your husband or wife - especially when conflict is present? Or if you're a parent and life is exhausting - is that because you're being diligent to parent your kids and it's hard, or you're not being diligent enough?

And those are just some of those complexities Proverbs wants to help us navigate. So, firstly…

Home: Happy or Hell?
Now Proverbs was written primarily to help the young men in King Solomon's household, who were going to become the future leaders, learn how to order their lives right. And what it makes clear is that, after your relationship with God, when it comes to how things are going to go with your life, nothing matters like your wife.

Proverbs 18:22, ‘He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favour from the Lord.’ Which is saying something. But compare that to Proverbs 8:35: ‘Whoever finds me [Wisdom] finds life and obtains favour from the Lord.’ So the implication is clear - after learning to live life with wisdom - the best thing that can happen to a man is to find a wife. And when you do, she is God’s gift of grace to you. You could never earn her or deserve her, but out of his unmerited love for you, God gives her to you.

And her value is beyond price. Proverbs 31:10: ‘An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.’ So imagine a bank vault with tray upon tray of diamonds, and pile upon pile of sapphires. Give them all away and in their place find a wife and you will be all the richer.

But not any old wife. Proverbs 19:14, ‘House and wealth are inherited from fathers, *but a prudent wife* is from the Lord.’ Note the *but* - it’s drawing a contrast. You can inherit from your parents, and they can set you up financially for life, but that is nothing in comparison to how God sets you up for life with a wife. A prudent wife.

Note the absence of any reference to physical looks. This is about a woman who is wise and discerning, who has insight and integrity. You see, if you’re young and single, how a future partner looks may be right up there on your list of criteria. She’s got to be a stunner. He’s got have dark eyes. But listen to Proverbs 31:30: ‘Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman *who fears the Lord* is to be praised.’

Now why are charm and beauty deceitful and vain? Because physical characteristics change. You see, one of the things that Su first found attractive about me was my hair. Look how that turned out. And external beauty has this tendency to sag and fall out. But when your wife loves God more than anything else, there’s an inner beauty that grows more beautiful by the day.

But secondly, external beauty can be deceitful because it makes you think the beauty goes all the way down. Proverbs 11:22: ‘Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.’ Sure the ring is shiny and glints in the sun, but there’s a pig attached. And this woman you’re interested in, or this guy you’re texting, may be beautiful, they may be handsome, they may be fun to hang out with, but what’s their character like? Do they love God more than themselves, more even than you?

You see, the reason you should want such a wife, Proverbs says, is that a woman of beautiful character will be *the* stabilising force in a home, Proverbs 14:1, ‘The wisest of women builds her house’ or more literally, womanly wisdom is what builds a home, so that all who are in it flourish.

And Proverbs 31 tells us is that she does that in multiple ways. Her life is centred upon home, but through her work, her business, her art, her generosity, her hospitality, her having and raising children, her managing staff, her influence spreads way beyond home. And as a result, as she flourishes, her husband and her children flourish. Proverbs 31:11, ‘The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.’

So it’s no wonder that Proverbs uses the same word to describe how her husband speaks of her as what we offer to God: Proverbs 31:28-29, ‘Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, *and he praises her*, “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.”’

And yet, Proverbs is not naive. It knows that not every marriage is a fairy tale. Proverbs 12:4, 'An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, *but she who brings shame is like rottenness in his bones.'* So a wife can be a crown, or, and we'll get to husbands later, she can be like a cancer.

And the area Proverbs homes in on is speech. Proverbs 19:13, 'A wife's quarrelling is a continual dripping of rain.' So imagine you're woken in the night by the sound of dripping. You get up, and rain is coming in at the ceiling. So you grab a saucepan to try and catch the drops. But as you soon as you place it, another leak appears on the other side of the room, so you run and get another saucepan. But then another leak starts so you go get a bucket, and then another, and another until you have run out of saucepans and buckets.

And Proverbs says a marriage can be like that. Now, we're not told why the wife is quarrelsome, we'll get to some possible reasons in a minute, but for now, this husband can't do anything right, nothing's ever enough. And like dripping water can wear down a rock, so quarrelling can wear down a heart. Proverbs 21:9 and 19, 'It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife…it is better to live in a desert land than with a quarrelsome and fretful woman.'

So a wife who is continually expressing her unhappiness can make her husband's life feel more cramped than a tent on a rooftop and more arid and dry than a desert.

Ok, but why is she quarrelsome? Well, Jesus said that it's out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. So it's what's going on in the heart. And James writes, 'What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that you passions [your desires, what you want] are at war within you' (James 4:1). So quarrelling comes when one spouse wants something and the other is not giving it.

And those desires might be wrong, and you probably know people who put unreasonable demands on their partner, but they might not be wrong. Proverbs 27:8, 'Like a bird who strays from its nest is a man who strays from his home.' And a bird who abandons the nest abandons its role to protect and provide for the chicks inside. And a husband for whom home is not enough, and he wants to be out, doing something exciting, like he used to do when he was single, or for whom home is too much, and work or sport is way less demanding, has deserted his duty, Proverbs says. And maybe that's why his wife is unhappy. She's calling him to his duty.

But as well as being protected and provided for, maybe she wants to be cherished, like the woman in Proverbs 31. And instead, what she gets, as we saw last week, are the sword thrusts of verbal attacks. Proverbs 26:21, 'As charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.' So while a quarrelsome wife can make a marriage so unpleasant that a chateau would not be big enough to escape in, a quarrelsome husband can burn the whole chateau down to the ground.

Ok, but if that is the happiness and the hardness of marriage, it's when kids come along that the fun really starts.

Children: Discipline or Disaster?

Look at Proverbs 10:1, ‘A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother.’ So being a parent can be the greatest of joys or the heaviest of heartaches. But if it is to be a joy, Proverbs says you have to invest in it.

Proverbs 22:6, ‘Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.’ And like all the proverbs, this is not a cast-iron guarantee, but it is a reliable observation.

And the word for *train up* is the word for *dedicating* a house or temple, to set something apart for its intended use. So, what’s that for a child? What’s the way her or she *should* go? Well, as the rest of Proverbs teaches us, it’s the way of wisdom and that from the earliest moment we should focus our parenting onto raising kids who love and fear God above all others, and who live that out in service of others.

But that’s not the same as saying ‘one size of parenting fits all’. Because as numerous commentators point out, the proverb says, ‘train a child in the way *he* should go.’ And Su and I were ready to write our book on parenting until daughter number… I won’t tell you which one!… came along, and everything that had worked before proved totally ineffective with her. And we were left thinking, what is happening?! What have we brought into the world?! Sure, Proverbs says, wisdom will tailor how you raise your children according to their individual characters, interests, and gifts. Now that is not expressive individualism in the kindergarten. There is still ‘*the* way’ and we should train them in.

And remember, everyone else is falling over themselves to train your child in the way *they* want them to go. Friends or teachers at school. Grandparents. Advertisers. Video game manufacturers and gadget makers. Everyone else has a vision for the kind of person they want your child to become. So let it be you who does the training, Proverbs says.

And as you do, it will require your investment of time and effort. Proverbs 19:18, ‘Discipline your son, for there is hope; do not set your heart on putting him to death.’ Now there are days when being a parent feels utterly thankless and hopeless. Su and I could tell you the multiple times we have crashed into bed feeling beaten up and like terrible parents and wondering, ‘what are we supposed to do?’ But Proverbs says, don’t despair. There is hope because there is God.

And don’t be a passive parent but neither be an angry one who just wants to kill your kids. Instead, discipline them - set boundaries and enforce boundaries.

And Proverbs tells us why we should do that with hope. Proverbs 29:15, ‘The rod and reproof *give wisdom*, *but a child left to himself* brings shame to his mother.’ And Proverbs 22:15, ‘Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.’ Now, just this week some friends of Katie, one of our daughters, have just had their first baby, and Katie got to visit and cuddle her. And she texted to say she was so tiny and cute. And I’m thinking, ‘No Katie! She’s not cute! She is a monster!’ As GK Chesterton wrote, “Original sin is the only doctrine that has been empirically validated by 2,000 years of human history.” Because you just have to have children of your own to know that everyone of us comes into this world with the determination to have the world revolved around us. And we start expressing that determination from the get go.

And Proverbs says discipline can help control that selfishness.

But it also tells us what should be motivating us. Proverbs 13:24, 'Whoever spares the rod hates his son, *but he who loves him* is diligent to discipline him.' So you don't discipline out of anger. And you don't discipline so that you can have a quiet life, or so your kids make you look good. Instead we discipline because we love them. Because the way of wisdom and learning to live life with skill is the best way, and we want them to take it.

So we're going to do it diligently. Which means being consistently consistent. Which means fighting the urge for an easy life and giving in to them. Instead, day in, day out, we train them, because we love them.

But is 'the rod' of discipline *physical* discipline or more than that? And the answer is, 'yes'! Because discipline, however you do it, is not the only weapon in your armoury. Proverbs 1:8-9, 'Hear, my son, your father's *instruction*, and forsake not your mother's *teaching*.'

Now, our kids are at an age where they are able *and willing* to tell us all the things we got wrong in parenting them. And recently, I asked Katie, our youngest, what we could have done better. And she said, you didn't talk enough about your personal relationship with God. We spoke a lot about God and theology and the Bible and culture, but much less about how to cultivate closeness with God. And yet, as you read Proverbs, it is hard to miss the passion with which the parents encourage their children to pursue God - to love him more than they love anything else. And so Proverbs would say, experience that love from God and for God for yourself, and then instil that passion in your kids.

But, once again, Proverbs is not naive about the hard things of parenting. You can do everything right and things still go wrong, because ultimately the child has to choose for themselves.

Proverbs 13:1, 'A wise son hears his father's instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.' So the fault is not the father's. He's training both sons. But one's listening and the other isn't. Or Proverbs 10:5, 'He who gathers in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame.' The implication being, you can have a hard working family with one son pulling his weight, while the other is pushing up the Z's in bed. Or Proverbs 29:3, 'He who loves wisdom makes his father glad, but a companion of prostitutes squanders wealth.' Two boys, and one happily pursues the path of wisdom, while the other fritters his life away on short-lived sex.

So the person growing in wisdom understands the incredible power of parenting, but they also understand its limitations. That we get to raise kids who love and serve God and others, but ultimately we're each accountable for ourselves, parents and children.

Ok, so, as we wrap Proverbs up, how can we become the kind of people who are growing in skill at life, so that if we're married we're increasingly the kind of person whose husband or wife thrives? That if we're single, we're making wise choices about what to look for in a spouse, or in helping our married friends be that kind of spouse? Or if marriage, or family, has been - or is - a loveless desert, where can you find the resources to deal with that? And if you're a parent, what can work on your heart so you want to train your kids in hope and in love, and not in anger and frustration?

Wisdom: A Husband and a Son

Right before Proverbs 31's description of the excellent wife, we get a prayer of a man in despair. Proverbs 30:3-4, 'I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One. Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has wrapped up

the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son's name? Surely you know!'

I mean, who could possibly understand God's wisdom?, he's saying. And what chance do we *really* stand of learning to live life with skill, when life is so complex? But if he's in despair, his questions leave you wondering. What if wisdom *were* a person? What if wisdom, described in Proverbs 8 as that through which God created the universe, the craftsman at his side, *were* to become a man and a son? And what if you *could* know his name? What then?

Well, the New Testament says that you don't have to wonder any longer. As Paul writes, 'because of [God] you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God' (1 Cor 1:30). So wisdom is not an elusive moral quality you have to spend your life pursuing. He's a person and you can know him.

And Jesus was, and is, the ultimate Son, who always listened to his Father's instruction. The Son who, Luke tells us in his gospel, 'increased in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man' (Luke 2:52). And the writer to the Hebrews tells us that 'although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered' (Heb 5:8). But what he suffered he suffered for our sins, not his. You see, if a father can have two children, one who pursues wisdom and the other folly, then Jesus is the ultimate righteous son, but we're the opposite. And we deserve the discipline and punishment of our Father, but at the cross Jesus stepped in and took it for us.

But he's also the ultimate husband, who did not abandon us, but came to us. Who protects and provides for his bride. Who loves and cherishes his people so much he laid down his life so that we might live.

And just like Proverbs 9 describes Wisdom inviting us to come feast at her table, so Jesus invites us to come feast at his, on bread and wine, his body and blood. Because through the cross he has brought us wayward sons and daughters back into his Father's family.

And it's there that we can find an oasis of love to bear a desert-like marriage and hope for change. It's there that we find a love that heals every wound yet refuses to leave us as we are, but melts our anger and humbles our pride, that can do so much damage to our relationships and children. And it's there that we begin to learn what true beauty looks like - the beauty of faithfulness and service and self-giving sacrifice. And we'll look for and praise that kind of beauty in our spouses.

And it's as your relationship with Christ deepens that all your other relationships find their right shape. Proverbs 14:26, 'In the fear of the Lord one has strong confidence, and his children will have a refuge.' In other words, the best thing you can do for your kids is love God more than them.

You see, if you love your children, or your husband, or your wife, more than God, they'll be your god. And you'll need them, and demand from them, and nag away at them, in ways that will break them. And when they fail to perform for you the way you want, you'll be broken by them. But when Christ is your greatest delight you'll love them with a love that causes them to thrive. And as they thrive, you'll thrive.

So, single or married, let us pursue the way of wisdom. Let it shape the way we seek a spouse or treat our spouse. Let's train our kids to do the same because, ultimately, the way of wisdom is Christ.