Proverbs and Sex
Proverbs 7:1-27

We're looking at the book of Proverbs. A book written to help us navigate life with skill. Except, it very quickly starts talking about sex - by chapter 2 to be precise.

And you might think, 'Really? I thought this was about living a higher, nobler life!' Sure, but Proverbs teaches us that we're not going to live *life* with skill until we're handling *sex* with skill.

You see, as James KA Smith, the American philosopher, says, you are not a brain on a stick. You're not a thinking thing, you're a loving, desiring thing. And the things you love and desire, the things you *want*, always trump what you think or know. I mean, you can know you should not eat another chocolate, but what good is *knowing* that when you want that chocolate?!

And the same's true of life. You can know you should behave in a certain way to handle this moment with skill, but it's what you want in that moment, it's what you desire, that determines whether or not you will.

And every guy I've ever sat down with who's struggling with porn, or gone too far with his girlfriend, or used a prostitute, or committed adultery, would say, 'I know that it's wrong. But I did it anyway.'

And Proverbs wants to help us understand why.

Now maybe you'd say, 'yes but sex isn't a problem for me'. But you are no less a lover, a desirer. And it may not be sex, but it may be affection, or romance, or just companionship. And it may not be the hot stud who turns your head, but the gentle guy who pays you a compliment. It may not be sexual, but it may be deeply emotional. And those are no less desires and they profoundly effect the way we behave.

Plus, we're sexual beings and those desires run deep and so it's easy to think 'I'll only be truly fulfilled if those desires are met.' The problem is, get it wrong and there are emotional, physical, spiritual consequences.

So we're going to look at three things: The tale of temptation; the cemetery of sin; and the solution to them both.

The Tale of Temptation
And in chapter 7, Solomon's like a Hollywood scriptwriter, spinning us a tale, dramatising a seduction. And he does it for a reason. You see, the young woman who wakes up in bed with her boyfriend, or the guy sitting alone in his room with his head in his hands after the prostitute has just left, isn't there by chance. It didn't just happen. There's always a story.

So Solomon narrates one. And he's looking down on the street and sees a young man, v7: 'And I have seen among the simple, I have perceived among the youths, a young man lacking sense.'

And ancient wisdom literature, like Proverbs, was aimed primarily, not exclusively, at young men and the next generation of leaders.

So it's got something specific to say to any of you young guys. But not just you. Look how Solomon describes him: he's one 'among the simple', someone 'lacking sense.' So, this is anyone

who, as we saw last week, rather than seeking to grow in wisdom is being tempted down Folly's path. It's anyone who would say with Augustine, 'Lord, make me chaste, [make me sexually, romantically pure] but not yet.' Anyone who wants God but wants sex or romance or affection more.

But then comes another character, because we watch the young man v8, 'passing along the street near *her* corner, taking the road to *her* house.' Who's *her*? Well, right before in v5 (and in chapters 2, 5, 6) Solomon talks of 'the forbidden woman… the adulteress' - the one his sons and everyman must avoid at all costs.

Yet those words 'forbidden' and 'adulteress' are translating the Hebrew words for 'strange' and 'foreign'. So she's anyone, male or female, who should be an outsider, out of bounds, a foreigner to you *sexually*. And if you're married, that's anyone other than your husband or wife; and if you're single it's anyone.

And yet the young man is walking past her house. Is he there deliberately? Does he know what he's doing, or is he just naive? We're not told. But that's the point isn't it. Either way, he's put himself in danger.

And look when it's happening: v9, 'In the twilight, in the evening, at the time of night and darkness.' How often does temptation come at night? When you're alone or lonely. When you're tired, or you've been drinking, and your resistance is lowered. Or maybe, you're just bored. Because what's he doing, loitering about, walking the streets at night? Hasn't he got something better to do?

But there's another kind of darkness that can leave you vulnerable. Maybe you're experiencing an emotional, relational or spiritual twilight. And you're sad, empty, or lonely. Maybe God feels distant. Or maybe dark clouds of stress have cast their shadow over you. And you're vulnerable to anything that offers to blunt the pain or relieve the stress or heal the hurt.

And so sexual, and romantic temptation, is a nocturnal predator. It hunts in the night and the dark.

Verse 10: 'And behold, the woman meets him, *dressed as a prostitute*.''Not my cup of tea,' you might think. But what does turn your head? What makes you go, about him or her, 'wow.' You see in Proverbs 6:25, Solomon says, 'Do not desire her beauty in your heart.' So there is such a thing as beauty, and it is attractive, but it's how we desire it, and the value we give it, that's the problem.

Proverbs 11:22 says, 'Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.' Is that woman beautiful! Yes. Is that guy ripped or handsome or whatever, yes! Is the ring made of gold, Yes! But there's a pig attached. And external beauty is external, and passing, and if that's what you're desiring above everything else, the pig muck is about to hit the living room carpet.

Because it's not just how she's dressed: v10, she is 'wily of heart', literally, *guarded of heart*. Let's keep this physical. Don't think, just feel. Sex with no strings attached. Sex without commitment or covenant. Sex, until a better option comes along leaving you, or her, discarded. Or, it might be the exact opposite of that. It may be *only* emotional - and it's the body that's guarded and the heart that's not. Either way, you're giving yourself to another who should be strange to you.

Now, the problem is, when you're vulnerable it feels like temptation's everywhere. Verse 12, 'Now in the street, now in the market, and at every street corner she lies in wait.' And whether it's advertising billboards, or the films we watch; whether it's travelling away from home, or a new colleague at work, it feels like you can't escape. But that's because, as the monks discovered, the problem is not out there, it's in here - the heart.

And that's where temptation works: Verse 13, 'She seizes him and kisses him, and with bold face *she says to him*…' But what does she say? Well, repeatedly Solomon warns us of her 'smooth words' (v5). Her *slippery* words. Words that make this sound so good, so right. That never admits what this actually is. In fact, in 5:3, Solomon says 'The lips of a forbidden woman drip honey.' This contact, this conversation, this relationship is going to be so sweet.

So when you feel yourself being tempted, ask yourself, what's the honey? What desire is it appealing to? What hunger is it offering to feed? What is it telling me that if I take it it is going to be so good?

But then look what she actually says, v14, "I had to offer sacrifices, and today I have paid my vows." And temptation and sin can coat itself in a veneer of religion. 'This *feels* so right, it must be right. We were made for each other. This is a God-thing.' Or, 'this is the way God made me.'

But then it gets personal, v15, "I have come out to meet you, to seek *you* eagerly, and I have found *you*." In 5:3 Solomon says, 'her speech is smoother than oil' (5:3). Temptation massages your ego, telling you, 'you are so special.' And this other person makes you feel wanted, admired, loved. When, in reality, this woman could have hit on any of the other guys in his circle of friends. But no, it's you that I want!

And when our hearts long for intimacy, those words speak deep into our hearts. Verse 18, "Come, let us take our fill of love till morning; let us delight ourselves with love." And temptation wants you to confuse love for lust.

But reality soon drops like a rock: Verse 19, "*For my husband* is not at home." Oh ok, so, it doesn't matter how special, how beautiful, how whatever this is, she has a husband, and sin is sin.

And yet it's her husband's absence that says, 'no one will ever know.' Verses 19-20, "He has gone on a long journey; he took a bag of money with him; at full moon he will come home." So this can be our little secret. And temptation offers you the excitement of risk, while telling you it's risk free. But it's that secrecy, that hiding from the light that tells you, this cannot be right.

Let's turn the tables, and imagine another woman, whose husband is also off on a business trip. Except this woman longs for her husband's affection and attention. The problem is, his work has it. And when he's home, she feels at best like a housekeeper. And when he isn't, she worries what he's doing. But she dare not ask because he holds the bag of silver. Now imagine how another man, maybe at the school gate, maybe at the gym, who speaks to her kindly, might be as tempting to her as a woman dressed as a prostitute is to this young man. Because it's got nothing to do with looks, and everything to do with the desires of our hearts.

But in every case, v21, it's the 'seductive… [and] smooth talk' that draws us in.

And as our narrator watches him, however much this young man may have vacillated, 'should I or shouldn't I?', the moment of decision comes, v22, 'All at once he follows her.' All at once he clicks; all at once she presses send on the text; all at once he does choose to sit at her table; all at once she does decides to wait for him outside.

But there's a whole story that precedes it, that helps explain why. And v22-23, 'As an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a stag is caught fast till an arrow pierces its liver; as a bird rushes into a snare; he does not know that it will cost him his life.'

The Cemetery of Sin

Now today we're told that our desires, especially our sexual ones, are key to our identity. So don't deny them - they're you.

So why should you deny them?

Because Proverbs says that if you go outside the bounds of what's right, you're playing with fire. Proverbs 6:27, 'Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned?' And in our foolish self-confidence we can think, 'yeh, I can do that!' Yet even Hollywood scriptwriters tell you, this attraction may just be fatal.

Proverbs 5:3 again, 'For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil.' But look what follows, v4 '*but in the end she is bitter as wormwood*.' <u>In the end</u>. As Derek Kidner writes in his commentary, there is always an end. There's always an after. The romance, the excitement, the affair *will* end and reality *will* come crashing in.

And what promised to be, maybe even tasted so sweet, now tastes as bitter as bitter can be. And the pleasure that lasted a few moments or days or weeks or months carries consequences for a lifetime.

They could be spiritual - the way sin deadens our conscience and quenches the Spirit. They could be physical and you find yourself sitting in the waiting room of the STD clinic. But perhaps most painful of all, they are relational. Because what promised to be just physical, or emotional, proves anything but.

You see, if this woman is dressed like a prostitute, she's dressed to kill. It's why 6:25 says, 'do not let her capture you with her eyelashes', and v27, she 'hunts down a precious life.' And that's not Proverbs being sexist. Switch the sexes and the message holds. Don't let him capture you with his smile.

Because, 7:27, 'Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death.' You see, if this relationship has an end, so too do our lives, and there is always an after, a judgement to come. And the Bible makes clear that sexual immorality, *if not repented of,* puts into question a person's profession of faith. And those short nights of pleasure are followed by the long dark night of eternity.

So, there is such a thing as beauty. And there is such a thing as love and intimacy. And God made you to desire them. But get them in the wrong order and we end up shamed and stained by sin. So, what's the answer? What's the answer to temptation and who can lead us out of the cemetery?

The Solution to Both

Look at v24. Solomon finishes his story and says, 'And now, O sons, listen to me, *and be attentive to the words of my mouth.*' It's how he introduces the story: v1-2, 'my son, keep my words and treasure up my commandments… keep my teaching as the apple of your eye.'

What's the apple of your eye? It's what's most dear to you, it's what you love above everything else. It's what you most desire. And Proverbs says, make God's word that. Verse 3, 'Write them on the tablet of your heart.'

You see, we can know the commandment against sexual immorality, and know it to be absolutely true, but unless we love God and his word more than what temptation is offering me right now, I'm going to fall for the temptation. But, if he is my number one desire, and if, as v4 says, we say to wisdom, '"You are my sister," and you call insight your intimate friend" *then* they will 'keep you from the forbidden woman' - or man. Because, as we've repeatedly seen, to be wise, to live life with skill, begins with fearing God, loving him above everything else.

How do you grow in that love? Well, Proverbs 2:6 says, 'For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.' And so it comes by daily coming to him, and listening to him in his word, and asking him to fan into flame your desire for him. And as we do, we'll be in a much better place to judge the words coming from the lips of temptation.

Yet nowhere do we get to hear the word of God or receive the treasures of his wisdom more than in Christ. And if we are hard-wired to desire beauty, listen to Psalm 45 talk of Jesus, 'You are the most handsome of the sons of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you forever.' (45:2) Because when it comes to beauty, a beauty that is majestic and heroic, Christ towers over them all.

And yet he humbled himself, and became like one of us. And when he did, he didn't come as one of the beautiful people. Isaiah says, 'he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, *and no beauty that we should desire him*' (Is 53:2). So why did the one beautiful beyond description stoop so low? To lift us up. And at the cross, he was marred beyond human recognition, that we might be healed. He took all our ugliness that we might have all his beauty. He took all our sexual sin that we might have all his purity. And in his death he entered the cemetery, so that in his resurrection he might lead us out.

And as we put our trust in him, we're made one with him. It's why Paul says, 'And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.' (Gal 5:24). And that frees you. It frees you to love him above everything else. It frees you, if you're single, to be chaste - to submit your sexual desires under your greatest desire, which is Christ.

And if you're married it frees you to be faithful, and satisfy your sexual desires within your marriage. You see, in Proverbs 5 we're told that instead of seeking pleasure with the person who should be strange to us, v18, 'Rejoice in the wife [or husband] of your youth.' In fact, v19, 'Be intoxicated [be led astray] always in her love.' Don't be led astray by *this*, but *absolutely do* be led astray by *this*. As Charles Bridges, the 19th century pastor wrote, 'Tender affection [within marriage] is the best defence against the desires of illicit passion.'

And not just because of what it *gives* us, but because of where it *points* us. Because in Ephesians 5 Paul says that all along the tender affection of a husband for his wife; and the tender affection of a wife for her husband, has been pointing us to Jesus, and his tender affection, his self-sacrificing love for us and our loving submission to him.

So, when you face the honey-dripping seductive talk of sin, ask yourself, what is it I most desire? and ask God to help you love Christ more.

But secondly, Proverbs 7:25, 'Let not your heart turn aside to her ways; *do not stray into her paths*.' In other words, avoid situations you know you find tempting. I mean, what was he doing out late at night, walking the street past her house, when saints on their way to heaven should be in bed by 11?! And Proverbs 5:8 says, 'Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house.' Because there's always a story. And one stolen glance, one conversation that pushes the envelope, one dawdling around the water cooler, leads to another. You start walking past her door but you end up in her bed.

And so, as Paul says to Timothy, whatever your age 'Flee youthful passions, and pursue righteousness' (2 Tim 2:22). That might mean installing an internet blocker, or taking a tool kit with you on your next business trip and unscrewing the TV from your hotel bedroom wall and sticking it in your shower for the duration of your trip. It might mean daily calling your accountability partner while you are away. It might mean taking a different route to work, or transferring departments or changing jobs or breaking with friends. Whatever it is, Proverbs 5:25 says that the guy - or girl - who falls for the forbidden - 'Dies for lack of discipline.' So do what you need to do.

As Paul says in Romans 13, 'Let us walk properly as in the daytime… not in sexual immorality and sensuality… But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.'

Thirdly, and finally, consider the consequences and then look to the cross. Proverbs 7:26: 'For many a victim has she laid low, and all her slain are a mighty throng'. He's saying, before you go down this route, look how it's gone for others. Look at the body count and let it sober you. Let the potential consequences of sin be a stinging slap around the face of passion.

One of the things I've done, and frankly feel the need to do again, is to sit down and write out the impact on Su and my girls, and my sons-in-law, and any future grandkids, and you, and the name and reputation of Jesus, if I was unfaithful to her, and let that list sober me.

But don't just look at the body count. Look at Christ. In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul is blunt, 'Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.' So what hope is there for someone like me, with all my sin and all my past, and all these desires fighting inside me. But then Paul says, 'And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.'

Temptation and sin will chew you up and spit you out. Jesus never does. He didn't come for the healthy, he came for the sick and the sinful. And he picks us up and washes us down and says, 'you are holy in my sight and I love you.' So let us love and desire him above everything.