Proverbs, God, and You
Proverbs 1:1-9

Today, we're starting a new series in the book of Proverbs. Before we do… who shapes people's characters, thinking and behaviour today? We could make a list, couldn't we: parents, teachers, friends; the media - celebrities, podcasters, social influencers; maybe even politicians.

And ancient Israel wouldn't have been much different - minus the podcasters. But look at Jeremiah 18:18. Because, writing in the 6th century BC, Jeremiah had been warning of coming judgment against Jerusalem's cultural elite, the culture formers of his day. But that warning had not been well received. And his enemies say, "Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah, for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet."

Priests, prophets, and the wise. Three groups shaping the thinking of the time, only their influence had become corrupting. But it hadn't always been that way. In fact, the Bible suggests you need all three speaking into your life if you're to live well. In fact it gives them to you: The Law, with God's commands, do this, but don't do that. The Prophets, with God speaking into specific situations. And the accumulated wisdom of God's people in books like Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

And those Wisdom books, and Proverbs in particular, deal with the nitty gritty of our characters and relationships. The kind of stuff that's too small to ever hit the radar of the Law and Prophets, but that makes all the difference to the quality of your life.

Stuff like: do you talk too much? What are you like in the morning? Or as an employee? How do you manage your time, or your desires? What will help you build strong relationships and what will destroy them?

And it applies wisdom to the minutiae of life, like passing comments, to bigger things like business practices, all the way up to the metaphysically profound and the creation of the universe.

But that begs a question, doesn't it? What's wisdom? What does it mean to be wise? And we might answer, 'the experience gained through life? Having the right answers at the right time?'

But Proverbs sees things differently. And the word it uses for wisdom is *hokmah*, the skill of a master craftsman. Because when you watched someone working with precious metals, or embroidering fabric, or sculpting designs, and they're at the top of their game, you'd have said, 'they've got hokmah', wisdom, skill.

And Proverbs wants to teach you that art of living. That craftsmanship applied to life. How to live life with skill. Because no one sets out to make a mess of their life, yet it happens. Or if not a mess, then we can find ourselves stagnating rather than growing. And Proverbs comes alongside and says, whatever your past, whatever your present, I want to show you how to live life well.

But ultimately, only one person has ever truly done that. So as we go through, we're going to see how Proverbs points us to Jesus, the one who Paul says has become for us, 'wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption' (1 Cor 1:30).

But before we get going, look at the very first verse: Proverbs 1:1: 'The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.' And Solomon, writing around 1000BC, is the principle author of the book. But not the only one. Two men, Agur and Lemuel also get mentioned, alongside anonymous 'wise men'. And the book itself tells us it was still being edited in the reign of Hezekiah, around 700BC.

But it all comes together as a study course on living wisely. It begins with chapters 1-9, and the choice you face between wisdom and folly and how your life depends on that choice. Then every subsequent proverb is like a maxim, not a cast-iron promise but an observation on life crystallised down into a bite sized chunk to help train you in life.

But we're not going to go through the whole book. Instead, we're going to look at key subjects it raises, beginning with God and you. Because Proverbs provokes you to consider three crucial questions: firstly, who is God? Secondly, How does he involve himself in in my life? And thirdly, how should I respond to him?

Who is God?
Now, if you flip through Proverbs you could come away with two misconceptions. Firstly, that life is all about you being healthy and wealthy, and here are some principles to help you achieve that. And secondly, that if you just have a bit of spirituality in your life, a bit of 'God', things will go well. Like our breakfast cereal packet that tells us, 'eat granola and do ten minutes of yoga every day, and everything else will come good.'

But Proverbs is anything but a self-help manual. Instead, it understands why humanity and individual lives can end up in a mess.

You see, in Genesis 3, Eve gives in to the serpent's temptation to eat from the tree the Lord had told her not to, but only after seeing that 'the tree was to be desired to make one wise' (3:6). But wise independent of God; deciding for herself what was right and wrong.

But Proverbs warns us against that kind of autonomy. It tells us we're not God. In fact, it tells us to truly live life with skill requires a life centred upon God, not yourself. A life ordered according to his word, whether or not it pays, whether or not it's efficient; whether or not it leads to success or the applause of influential others.

And specifically, it teaches us that the person who's going to live life with skill understands five crucial things about God.

Firstly, **you can know him personally**.

Look at 1:7, 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.' And we'll look at fear later, for now look at LORD, in capitals. It's the way our English bibles translate the Hebrew name, YHWH. It's God's covenant name, the name his people can know him by.

Now, have you ever experienced talking about a Mr. Dr. or Professor so and so, and the other person goes, 'o I know David, he's a good friend of mine!'? Now, they may just be trying to impress you, or it may be true. But what if you could say that about God? What if when others talk of God as some distant deity, you could know him personally, in genuine and deep relationship?

And Proverbs says, you can, in fact you must if you want to navigate life with skill. That he's not just God, he's *my* God.

But would that kind of familiarity breed contempt? No.

Because, secondly, the person who wisely navigates the complexities of life understands, **God is our Creator**, and lets that influence their actions and interactions.

Look at 22:2: 'The rich and the poor meet together; the LORD is the maker of them all.' Now, have you ever found yourself speaking to someone in person, or on the phone, like in a call centre, in ways you would never dream of speaking to your boss? Why? Because we develop these hierarchies based on status or possessions or achievements or the type of house they live in or clothes they wear.

And we think, 'this person is of less value than me'. But Proverbs says you have more in common than you can imagine, beginning with the fact that God is their and your maker. And that tells you that whatever success you encounter in life, you're not self-made. You're God-made and your intellect or health or aptitude to work are given you by him. And when you understand that it humbles you at the same time as filling your heart with gratitude.

But so too is the person you're tempted to look down on. They're also God's workmanship. And that gives them dignity and worth and should profoundly change the way we treat them.

But knowing God is your maker does something else. As Augustine put it, 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.' And the truly wise person isn't just humble, and grateful and kind towards others, they also know that true satisfaction doesn't come from created stuff, stuff you can earn or buy, but from being in deep relationship with your Creator.

Thirdly, wisdom knows that God is **Holy and Righteous.**
Look at 9:10: 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge *of the Holy One* is insight.' And *Holy One* is plural. It's what's called 'a plural of majesty'. It's why Isaiah heard the angels calling out, 'holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Hosts' because he is three times holy. Holy in every dimension.

And the person who wants to live life well gets that. That God is not an extension or reflection of themselves, existing to sprinkling blessing on whatever they think, feel or do. He's holy and utterly different.

And he's righteous. Look at 21:12: 'The Righteous One observes the house of the wicked; he throws the wicked down to ruin.' So God's not just holy, he's just and will see that justice is done. And so to live wisely is to know that all the external appearances of success - like here, beautiful houses - are not the last word. Instead, there is a holy and just judge and a judgment to come which will deeply impact the way we view and pursue success.

Fourthly, living life with skill means grasping that **God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent.**

Look at 5:21: 'For a man's ways are before the eyes of the LORD, and he ponders all his paths.' Now have you ever walked down a farm track, where the tractors have created deep ruts in the path? Well, the word for 'ways' here is the word for wagon tracks - those ruts worn in a road by repeated use.

And so Proverbs teaches that God doesn't just see into our hearts, he also sees the ruts, those well-worn paths of our repeated mistakes, the habitual sin patterns of our lives. What the Book of Common Prayer calls the devices and desires of our hearts. We may wonder, 'why did I do that again?' but God doesn't. He reads us like a book. And he sees through all the layers of hurt or hiding or self-justification.

And we cannot escape his gaze. Proverbs 15:3: 'The eyes of the LORD are in *every* place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.' Now, when you're a parent, there are times when you wish you had eyes in the back of your head, aren't there? But we're constrained by our bodies. God isn't. We can't see further than the horizon, but God has no horizon. As the writer to the Hebrews says, 'No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.' (4:13).

But you could know everything and see everything and still be powerless to do anything about it. But not God. Proverbs 21:30: 'No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the LORD.' So, to live life wisely is to live knowing that no amount of strategising, planning, or policy making, can outmanoeuvre him. He always has the last word, and it's always the wisest.

Because… fifthly, living life skilfully means knowing that **God is Sovereign**. Look at chapter 16: 'The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble… The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps… The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.' (v4, 9, 33)

In other words, God's sovereign over evil, sovereign over your plans, and he's even sovereign over seemingly chance events like the toss of a coin.

But does that mean that skilful living amounts to nothing more than passive resignation? ke sera sera, whatever will be will be? Inshallah, if God wills? No. It means the wise person can live and plan and strategise with confidence and security knowing that, even though they can't see it, everything lies in God's hands and he's working it all to see his plans and purposes established.

Which brings us to the second question the wise person can answer:

How Does God Involve Himself in Your Life?
Look at 17:3: 'The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, *and the LORD tests hearts.*'

Now, in our culture, you're told that true love means to let the other person be, and express, themselves. You be you. But Proverbs teaches us that God loves you far too much to do that. Instead, like a master craftsman purifying precious metal he's at work refining you. The problem is, that might just feel like you're in a furnace. But to live life skilfully is to realise that even setbacks, as much as success, even this criticism I'm receiving, as much as this praise, is given by God for my growth. And so the wise person doesn't grow bitter when life feels like a crucible or trial. Instead they're asking, what is God teaching me, or revealing about me, through this?

Because God's involvement in your life is that of a loving Father. Proverbs 3:11-12: 'My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.'

Now, when life is not going the way we want we can think, 'Why is God letting this happen, or not happen, I thought he loved me?' But Proverbs says, it's precisely because he loves you that he's letting it happen or not letting it happen. And it's not the discipline of the justice system, but of the family. It's not punishment, but him wanting to see you grow into his likeness.

And he doesn't leave you stumbling around in the dark as to what that looks like. Proverbs 30:5: '*Every word of God proves true*; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.' Which means, God is a God who speaks, who reveals himself, through his word, and every word of his word is true.

Now you might react to that by saying, 'All this stuff about not deciding for myself what's right and wrong, him being a judge, living life by the Bible… I want freedom not walls.' Sure, but total freedom isn't freedom, it's slavery. And the walls of God's word aren't a prison, but they are a fortress, a refuge, a stronghold. Because as you go through life you will encounter enemies and fight dragons, but when you know God through his word you'll have a shield, Proverbs says.

So, Proverbs 3:25-6 - 'Do not be afraid of sudden terror or of the ruin of the wicked, when it comes, for the LORD will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught.' So, the wise person knows that their confidence is not in themselves, or in others, but in God, because he's protecting you even from traps. And that keeps you from being paralysed by fear about the future. Instead, you know 'he's my security, and he will see me safely through.'

But as he does, he's also the One who gives you the ability to live life with skill in the first place. Proverbs 2:6: 'For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.' In other words, as you grow in relationship with him, hearing him speak to you through his word, wisdom will be his gift to you.

So, given all that, third question…

How Should We Respond to Him?

And Proverbs says in two overarching ways. Firstly by **fearing him**.

Proverbs 9:10 again: '*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*, and *the knowledge* of the Holy One is insight.' So to fear God is to know him. But to know him is to love him. And to love him is to fear to grieve him. As Charles Bridges, the 19th century pastor wrote, 'The child of God only has one dread - to offend his Father. The child of God only has one desire - to please and delight him.' And so the fear of God is a happy, awe-filled reverence for the God we love.

And so skill in living doesn't come through life hacks or spiritual practices or even great reading habits. It comes through knowing and loving the One who made you and watches over you.

And when you do, Proverbs says it will transform your life.

Proverbs 19:23: 'The fear of the LORD leads to life, and whoever has it rests satisfied.' So to love God so much you fear to grieve him leaves you feeling content, because your life begins to take on a right order. Now compare that to Proverbs 29:25: '*The fear of man* lays a snare.' So while fearing God brings contentment, fearing what others think becomes a trap. As Oswald Chambers wrote, 'The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God, you fear nothing else. But when you don't fear God you fear everything else.'

Then look at Proverbs 14:26: ‘In the fear of the LORD one has strong confidence, and his children will have a refuge.’ You see, if you fear what others think more than what God thinks you’ll elevate what current culture says above what God’s word says, and you’ll either try and duck or re-interpret God’s word to make it acceptable. That could be on sex, or gender, or marriage, or identity, or the role of men and women, or any number of contemporary issues. But when you do your kids will have no clue who has the authority: is it God, and his word, or what this influencer, or my friends, or wider society are saying? But when you live in the fear of God, they’ll know who’s God. And amidst all the craziness of life, they’ll have a refuge, Proverbs says.

But it won’t just do them good, it’ll do you good: Proverbs 16:6: ‘By steadfast love and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of the LORD one turns away from evil.’ Augustine wrote that, ‘The whole life of a good Christian is a holy desire.’ A desire to know and love and please God. The problem is, we’re often desiring other things, aren’t we. But grow in your knowledge of God, and your desire *for him* will deepen, and desire for this other stuff will diminish. And as Proverbs 3:7–8 says, ‘fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. *It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.*’

But to do that, don’t just fear him, **trust him.**

Proverbs 3:5-6: ‘Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.’

Now have you ever found yourself saying something like, ‘that worked before, I’ll do it again’ Or, ‘Well, everyone else is doing it, so I probably should.’ And when you are under pressure, and you just need to do *something*, to do it without, or with minimal reference to God, is one of the great temptations. It’s to lean on your own understanding.

But when it says, ‘in all your ways *acknowledge* him’ what it literally says is, ‘in all your ways *know* him.’ And so to live life with skill is to consciously, through prayer and hearing his voice through his word, inviting God into every area of your life - even those bits under pressure.

And as you do, his word may tell you things you don’t want to hear. But it’s precisely then that you need to trust. We’ve already heard Proverbs 30:5, that ‘Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.’ But v6 follows with, so ‘Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you.’ And when you encounter stuff in God’s word that you don’t like, the temptation is to try and get it to say something more palatable, and make it say what you want it to say. Add to it. But the wise person knows that God might just know more that I do, and so trusts him.

Great… But you might go, ‘but how can I know him well enough to trust him?’

Well, when Proverbs uses God’s covenant name, YHWH, it’s a name based on his revelation of himself to Moses that ‘I AM WHO I AM’ (Exodus 3:14). You and I have a maker, but God does not. He simply is, I AM. But then Jesus came and said, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am’ (John 8:58). And the God who made us, became one of us. The Maker of rich and poor became poor. And the totally trustworthy Word of God became flesh.

Isaiah said of Jesus, ‘The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him… the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. *And his delight* shall be in the fear of the LORD.’ (Is 11:2-3). And Jesus is the only one who has ever perfectly loved and trusted the Father. The only one who has truly lived life with skill. It’s why Jesus said of himself, ‘something greater than Solomon is here’ (Matt 12:42) . It’s why Paul says of him, that in Christ ‘are hidden *all the treasures of wisdom* and knowledge’ (Col 2:3).

And the reason you can trust God and love him so much you fear to grieve him, is that at the cross Jesus went through the crucible of affliction and the furnace of purification for you. And all your impurity was counted to him, so that all his righteousness and holiness might be counted to you. And if Proverbs 16:6 says that by steadfast love and faithfulness sin is atoned for, it’s through Christ's steadfast love and faithfulness to God and to you that all your sins are atoned for. And it’s because of him that you can live your days under the favour and smile of God.

So, trust him. And let your love for him grow. And as you do, your skill at life will grow.