Wisdom and Folly
Proverbs 8

We're looking at the Book of Proverbs, a book written to help teach us *wisdom*. Which is the English translation of the Hebrew word *hokmah* - the skill of a master craftsman. You look at a work by Michelangelo, or Rembrandt, and think, they knew what they were doing, and Proverbs says, yes and I want to teach you that craftsmanship for life.

And yet, Proverbs is not one dimensional. You see, as well as giving us a whole number of different words and ideas to help us see why we should pursue wisdom, it also shows us the alternative - and why we might just be tempted to pursue it.

And that's what we're going to look at today: wisdom and folly. Firstly, Wisdom - what it is; secondly - wisdom's alternative and why you might be tempted to choose it; thirdly, why you *should* pursue wisdom, and fourthly how you can get it.

Wisdom: What it Is
There was an article in the UK press this week entitled, *Getting Older Doesn't Make You Wiser*. It reported a recent study by an Austrian academic looking at whether things we typically associate with wisdom like good financial decisions or the ability to empathise, increased with age. And despite the wide-spread assumption that older people are wiser - fuelled by popular characters who are old and wise, like Gandalf, or Dumbledore, it ain't necessarily so. That, as Oscar Wilde said, 'with age comes wisdom' but 'sometimes age comes alone'.

And Proverbs would respond - 'I've been telling you that for the last 3000 years! You don't grow wise simply by serving time.'

Look how the book opens, 1:2-5: 'To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth— Let the wise hear and increase in learning.'

And so Solomon, the author of this part of Proverbs, picks up wisdom like a diamond, and turns it in front of you, to show you all the different facets of wisdom: instruction, insight, wise-dealing, prudence, discretion, learning - themes that keep getting repeated throughout Proverbs.

The problem is, our translations often use different words for the same Hebrew word. So we're going to look at some of them, but don't get bogged down in the word. Instead, get a feel for what navigating life with skill looks like at street level.

Facet no. 1: **Instruction**: 1:2, 'To know wisdom *and instruction*.' And Proverbs 24 gives us a case study of what this word *Instruction* is getting at. 'I passed by the field of a sluggard, by the vineyard of a man lacking sense, and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. Then I saw *and considered it*; I looked *and received instruction*' (v30-32).

So to live a wise life is to live a reflective life. It's to observe what's going on around you and consider it. To try and learn from it. Including the missteps of others. But not just others. You see elsewhere the same word is translated *discipline*. Proverbs 3:11 'My son, do not despise the LORD's *discipline* or be weary of his reproof.'

So to live life with skill is not the same as having lived a charmed life, where you never put a foot wrong. Instead, wisdom comes through knocks and learning from them.

One of my daughters has a friend who she occasionally goes for walks with. The problem is her friend has this habit - when they're walking side by side - of bumping into her, which can get a bit annoying. But that's exactly what instruction does to you. As you walk through life, it keeps bumping you, not because *it* can't walk straight, but because we can't. It's why one commentator calls this instruction, 'education through correction' (Kitchen). And that tells you, growing in wisdom may not always feel comfortable. Sometimes it may chafe. But the wise person welcomes its corrective knocks.

But then Solomon turns the diamond again: facet no. 2: **Insight.** Proverbs 1:2, 'To know wisdom and… to understand words of ***insight***.' Now maybe you know someone who you'd say is 'pretty insightful'. Why? It's their ability to see the wood for the trees. And Proverbs says, 'correct', because two words are close to the Hebrew word for insight and help give us its meaning: the verb 'to discern', and the preposition, 'between.'

And to live life with skill means to be able *to discern between*. Shortly after Solomon became king, God appeared to him in a dream, telling him he could ask for anything. And Solomon's response was, "Give your servant… an understanding mind to govern your people, *that I may discern between* good and evil." (1 Kings 3:9). That's wisdom. Faced with two or more options you make the right choice, Faced with complexity, you navigate well. Faced with good and evil, you choose the good. You see what God sees.

Last week, Su and I went back country skiing and ended up in a total white out. We knew we had to make our way along this ridge, but could not see a thing. So every 20m we had to stop and consult the GPS. But true wisdom sees through the fog of life and the options you face and says, 'that's the direction we should go.'

But then Solomon turns the jewel again. Facet number 3, **wise dealing:** 1:3: 'To receive instruction in wise dealing.' Or, as it's also translated: prudence. Like 10:5, 'He who gathers in summer is a *prudent* son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame.'

Now, in the summer, there are a whole load of things you'd rather do than the back-breaking work of gathering in the harvest. Like go to the beach, or swim in the pool, or lie in the hammock, or drink a cold beer (unless you're a baptist, in which case you get water). But the person who's learning to live life with skill understands that there are seasons in life when the work needs doing and the fruit comes later. That to reap the fruit of work, or learning, you've get to get out of bed, literally or metaphorically. And so the wise person swings their legs out. They get delayed gratification.

But then there's a fourth facet: **discretion:** 1:4, 'to give… discretion to the youth.' And this can be good or bad. In fact, the first time you meet it in the Bible it's bad. Genesis 3:1: 'Now the serpent was *more crafty* [had more *discretion,* was more shrewd] than any other beast.' And Proverbs 12:2 says, 'A good man obtains favour from the LORD, but a man *of evil devices* [a man who uses discretion for ill] he condemns.'

But it doesn't have to be bad. Proverbs 22:3, 'The prudent [the person *with discretion*, same word] sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it.' So, you can be shrewd and dig holes for others to fall in, always making sure you come out on top, *or* you can use discretion to avoid those holes. And the person who's learning to live life with skill learns to rightly read risks, and red flags, and warning signs.

In my previous life as a doctor, one of my tasks was to set up a neonatal transport service for moving sick babies between hospitals. But the most difficult task we encountered as a team was not getting competing and headstrong doctors to work together, it was changing the culture - from 'o everything will be fine - we just need to stick the baby in an incubator, get it in the back of an ambulance, or aeroplane, and everything will be fine', to, 'ok, here's what could go wrong, and here's how we can mitigate it.'

But Proverbs says, 'that's wisdom. It's that skill of seeing risks and rightly, wisely, responding to them.'

But then Solomon turns the diamond one last time. Facet number 5: **Learning.** Proverbs 1:5, 'Let the wise hear and *increase in learning*.' Or, as it's translated elsewhere, *knowledge*.

Now, firstly, did you notice who's increasing in learning? The wise. So, the wise don't arrive. The person who lives life with skill knows they've always got more growing to do, more knowledge to be had.

But not the kind of knowledge that means everyone wants you on their team for the pub quiz or church retreat. Proverbs 2:5, 'Then you will understand the fear of the LORD, and find *the knowledge of God*.' And in the Bible, to know someone means to know them intimately. It's the knowledge of lovers, of husbands and wives.

So the wise are not the pragmatists, 'this'll work', or the efficient - 'this'll be quick'. Instead, as we saw last week, when Proverbs 3:5-6 says, 'Trust in the LORD with all your heart… in all your ways *acknowledge* him', what it actually says is, in 'all your ways *know* him'. So to live wisely is to seek to love him and honour him, increasingly, in all these different areas of your life.

But, Proverbs is not naive. It knows there's an alternative path through life, and its tempting.

Wisdom's Alternative and why you might choose it
Proverbs 9:13, 'The woman Folly is loud; *she is seductive*.'

So, Folly, foolishness is the enticing alternative to wisdom, and Proverbs gives us snap-shots of 3 different people who have chosen her path: the Simple, the Fool, and the Scoffer.

Firstly, ***The Simple.*** Proverbs 1:32, 'The simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them.' Now what are the simple turning away from and that turning away does them so much harm? Well, if you look at the context, it's the fear of the LORD. Which is why it's paired with complacency. So to be wise is to spot danger and temptation ahead, but the simple person is complacent and careless about God and drifts into temptation, maybe even playing with it.

And there's a reason they do: Proverbs 15:21: 'Folly *is a joy* to him who lacks sense'. You see, you can hear stuff about living life with skill, learning the lesson of knocks, discerning good and evil, and rightly reading risk, growing in intimacy with God, and think, 'everyone else is having way more fun!' Yes, but it's an illusion, Proverbs says.

Not that that would bother the second person Proverbs describes: ***The Fool.*** Proverbs 1:7: 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; *fools despise* wisdom and instruction.' So the fool is not unintelligent - they may have more degrees than you can shake a stick at, but he's obstinate and no one can teach him anything, because no one knows more than he knows. Or so he thinks.

Proverbs 12:15: ‘The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise person listens to advice.’ So, you can be going down a certain path and a friend says, ‘I’m not sure that’s right, in fact I think it’s wrong.’ But who wants to hear that?! It’s way more appealing to think I’m always right!

But that results in two things. Firstly, the fool is argumentative: 20:3, ‘It is an honour for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarrelling.’ Because if I think I’m always right, I’ve got to win the argument. And besides, it feels good to come out on top, to own the opposition.

But secondly, 14:9, ‘*Fools mock* at the guilt offering.’ Because if you think you’re always right, then no one else gets to tell you how to live your life, including God. And that frees you from any sense of guilt. Instead, everyone else’s job is to affirm you in the path you’ve chosen.

So… the third personality wandering down Folly’s path is, ***The Scoffer***. 13:1: ‘A wise son hears a father’s instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.’ Or 15:12, ‘A scoffer does not like to be reproved; he will not go to the wise.’

So the scoffer’s the ultimate expressive individualist. None of us like being corrected, but the scoffer’s makes it a hallmark. But that comes at a cost. You see such a person often prides themselves on seeing what no one else can see, they’re not being fooled like everyone else. They think they’re sage, that they’re wise. But in resisting correction they cut themselves off from the very thing that might make them wise: 14:6, ‘A scoffer seeks wisdom in vain.’

A couple of years back, an acquaintance asked me to help with a project they were working on, but as I read through it it became clear it would need major reworking, so I said so. It was not well received. The person gave all the right impressions of seeking advice, but when it came to the crunch they were already convinced they were right. Because it’s always more appealing to think you’re *already* wise than that you might need to make corrections to your life to become wise.

So, that’s the alternative, Folly. So, thirdly…

Wisdom: Why You *Should* Pursue It
And Proverbs 8 gives a string of reasons to learn the art of skilful living.

And in v1-5, Lady Wisdom, invites you to come, join the feast,‘Does not wisdom call?… “O simple ones learn prudence, O fools, learn sense.” Which means, regardless of the current chaos of our lives, everyone’s invited, anyone can become wise.

And if you respond to the invite, Proverbs says it’ll transform your character: v6: “Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right.” And *noble things* literally means *princely things*. Not that you’ll start behaving like a member of the British royal family, but there’ll be a dignity, a poise, an inner courage about you.

Then v11: ‘Wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you desire cannot compare with her.’ So, let a growing love for God permeate every area of life and there’ll be a richness about your life that has nothing to do with your salary.

Plus, wisdom is the key to all true success. Verses 14-18, “I have counsel and sound wisdom; I have insight; I have strength. By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; by me princes rule, and

nobles, all who govern justly. I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me. Riches and honour are with me, enduring wealth and righteousness."

So whether it's insight that stands the test of time, or a steely inner resolve; whether it's learning to lead in ways that do people good, or the kind of career success that means you can sleep with your conscience at night, wisdom says, I'm the one who can teach you.

But not just worldly triumphs. You see v22-31 describe Wisdom as the principle by which God created the universe. Verses 23-26, "Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth… before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world." Which means, every speck of dust and every physical law and constant bears the finger prints of Wisdom.

And that tells you, that to pursue wisdom is to live in the grain of creation. Now, maybe you know what it's like to work against the grain - and everything snags, and things don't quite go as they should, and you need to put in more effort. And Proverbs says, so why live like that?

Instead, learn to delight in what God delights in, because, v30 "I [wisdom] was daily his delight." Whereas not to do so is like a form of self-harm, v36, "he who fails to find me injures himself."

Now, have you ever been Geocaching? You have an app, and follow the clues to try and find a little hidden treasure - generally a totally worthless tiny plastic container! But when you find it everyone goes, 'yey! Got it!'

But how much more is the search for wisdom worth our time! The question is, how can you find it?

Wisdom: How You Can Get It

Well, we've already seen how Lady Wisdom invites you to come and feast. And yet, Proverbs makes clear that she is not like some inebriated hostess scattering gifts to any random passerby. If you want to find wisdom, Proverbs says, you've got to apply yourself to it. You've got to incline your heart, raise your voice, seek for it and search for it. It takes deliberate effort on our part.

Again, Proverbs 9:10 tells us that, 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom', but in 8:13 it says that 'the fear of the LORD is hatred of evil.' So if you are to become more skilful at life, and lay hold of wisdom, you're going to have to let go of sin. Generally, it's not looking to created things, good or bad, to satisfy you, but to your Creator. And specifically it means being prepared to break with old habits or wrong relationships. It means repentance and being teachable and open to critique.

But of course, that can be costly. Proverbs 23:23 says, '*Buy* truth, and do not sell it; *buy* wisdom, instruction, and understanding.' In other words, there's a price to be paid.

So what can make you want to pay it?

Well, look at the picture Proverbs uses: 8:34, "Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors." And the person who pursues and finds wisdom is like a young star-struck lover, hanging around outside the house of his beloved, hoping for a glimpse of her, or just to overhear her speak.

And in Proverbs 8:17 Wisdom says, "I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me." You see, we always pursue what we most love. So if we're to forsake folly, and take hold of

wisdom, then something other than folly, something other than your own opinions, or you always being right, or instant gratification, has to become more beautiful to you.

Now, the irony of Solomon being one author of Proverbs is that just like every other king, he blew it. But Isaiah prophesied a king would come who wouldn't blow it: 'There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse [Solomon's family tree], and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, *the Spirit of Wisdom*' (Is 11:1-2). And then in chapters 52-53, Isaiah describes how that king will be a servant, the LORD's servant, and our sin-bearer. But that description begins with God saying, 'Behold, my servant *shall act wisely.*' (Is 52:13)

And Jeremiah also saw that king coming: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David [Solomon's father] a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king *and deal wisely*." (Jer 23:5).

So if Proverbs gives us wisdom personified - it's only when Jesus comes that we see wisdom's true identity. And in Colossians 1 Paul echoes Proverbs 8, only now, the Wisdom overseeing creation is Christ: 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created… through him and for him.' (V15-16). It's why he says that in Jesus, 'are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (2:3).

And in Proverbs 8:35, Wisdom says, 'Whoever finds me finds life', but Jesus comes and says, "I am… *the life.'* (John 14:6). And John says of him, 'Whoever has the Son has life' (1 John 5:12).

And Jesus takes up Wisdom's call, inviting you to come: "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink." (John 8: 37). "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. *Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me*, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt 11:28-29). And what's that but an invitation to be trained in life by the only One who has ever lived it with skill?

So how can you love him more than folly, more than your own opinions, more than your sin? Well listen to what John writes: 'We love because he first loved us' (1 John 4:19). And before ever you set your heart to pursue wisdom, see how Jesus has pursued you. That before you sought him, he came to seek and save you. And at the cross Isaiah tells us, 'he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement [the discipline of wisdom - same word] that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed' (Is 53:5).

And Jesus was the ultimate wise son who obeyed the Father's instruction, yet he took the discipline we deserve, he suffered the death for our turning away, and he did it so we might know the favour of God.

So, when you're confronted with the cost of learning wisdom from Jesus, maybe that's in hearing rebuke, learning from criticism, or taking advice - and you're wobbling, see him paying the cost for you. When you're wondering whether you really want to forsake your sin, see him forsaking all for you.

And when you see him filled with love for you, your heart will fill with love for him. And his Spirit, the Spirit of wisdom and fear of the Lord, will fill your heart, and you'll gladly walk in his ways, take up his yoke.