

PROVERBS 1-31
DEVOTIONAL

By Pastor Phil Emerson

NAME: _____

OUR DISCIPLESHIP FLOW

At Emmanuel Church, we are passionate about living out the call to be disciples of Jesus Christ, and make it our goal to see His Kingdom come in our lives and the world in which we live. We recognise that in Biblical times, a disciple was someone who followed a teacher or rabbi, not simply to gain head knowledge to pass an examination, but to be fully immersed in the life of the rabbi, and *learn his ways*, so that they in turn could replicate this to the world around them. As Christians, we are now those who have been invited to ‘follow’ Jesus and all of His ways, and we therefore call ourselves His disciples.

“This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.” 1 John 2:5,6

We therefore want to take seriously the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20 to make disciples and also commit to an ongoing journey of teaching and discipleship together.

We all have differing personalities and learning styles. At Emmanuel, we recognise this diversity within the church body and therefore desire to support and journey together as we relate with God and each other in some of the following environments:

- **Public (20+)**

In the Bible, we see Jesus seeking to make disciples as He engaged with larger numbers of people, e.g., His interaction with the crowds (Matthew 4:25; Luke 14:25), and the 72 (Luke 10:1-24).

At Emmanuel, we want to use each of our **larger gathered environments** as an opportunity to make disciples, e.g., **Sunday services, Friday Youth/Kids’** environments, **men’s/women’s** gatherings.

- **Social (10-15)**

Jesus demonstrated the necessity for **smaller accountable relationships** as an essential part of the life of a disciple. He did this by teaching and doing life with his twelve disciples (e.g., Matthew 10).

At Emmanuel, small accountable relationships are offered through:

Lifegroup 12s

These are **gatherings of 10-15 people** who meet bi-weekly in homes or around specific interests, e.g., crafts, football.

- **Personal (2-5)**

As well as having smaller accountable relationships amongst His twelve friends, Jesus also seemed to go to even deeper levels of trust with three in particular – Peter, James and John (Matthew 17; Mark 9). At Emmanuel, we seek to do this through:

Lifegroup 3s

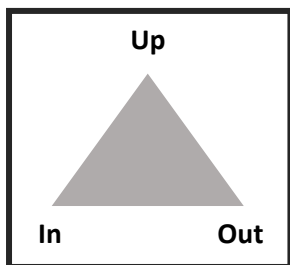
These are smaller **gatherings of 2-5 people** who are committed to transparent and accountable relationships in order to grow together in following Jesus. The aim for these groups is that after 1-2 years, each person in the group would be able to lead a smaller number of people themselves and replicate the process... **disciples making disciples!**

- **Intimate (1-1)**

Jesus regularly withdrew to spend time alone with the Father. This is the ultimate goal of discipleship, that each member of our church family would increasingly spend time alone with the Father and grow in devotion and desire to see the Kingdom come.

A TOOL TO USE

As stated previously, 1 John 2:6 makes it clear that for those of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus, our goal should be to daily walk in the ways of Jesus, our Rabbi. As we examine the New Testament we see that Jesus lived His life based on three relationships: **Up** – with His Father; **In** – with His chosen followers; **Out** – with the hurting world around Him. This is illustrated in the following triangle:



Jesus taught and modelled out to His disciples how to live into each of these areas in life.

Up

Jesus frequently left the disciples to spend personal time with the Father (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16). He taught them the significance of prayer, and how to pray and communicate with the Father (Luke 11:1-13). When comparisons with one another or insecurities presented themselves, He spoke into it in love and challenged them into a greater depth of living (Mark 9:33-37; Matthew 18:1-5).

In

Jesus had significant relationships with others in which He intentionally invested (12s and 3s). When He went to engage with the Father He brought the three with Him (Matthew 17:1). He taught them and modelled out the significance of Sabbath and rhythms of rest (Mark 6:31). He demonstrated with His life the significance of generosity and sacrificial love for others (John 13:1-17).

Out

Jesus personally lived a life that engaged with the crowds and the broken world around Him. He healed the sick (Matthew 8:1-4), fed the poor (Mark 6:30-44), and cast out demons (Matthew 8:28-34). But with the people who were closest to Him, He challenged them to do the same (Mark 6:37), and when they took risks themselves He critiqued and gave honest feedback to call out more for them (Luke 10:17-20).

As we spend time alone or together in this devotional, we want to help and encourage you to engage in each of these ways – UP, IN, and OUT.

HOW TO USE THE BOOK

First

If you haven't already done so, please take a second to fill in your name on the inside of the front cover. There'll be a lot of identical books floating around, and we don't want yours to get lost.

Prepare

Get ready for each session by spending some time to invite the Holy Spirit to speak to you. The Bible is a written word (logos), which becomes a living word (rhema) as the Holy Spirit breathes upon it and speaks directly to our lives through it.

Commit

Commit to the journey. Discipleship is not a commitment to a moment, but to a lifetime journey. As you personally commit to journeying with God daily, commit to others by sharing what you are learning (possibly in Lifegroup 12s or 3s), and in this way encouraging one another in what God is saying.

Reflect & Respond

Each day, as you spend personal time with God, we encourage you to ask the following two questions:

- 1) What is God saying to me?
- 2) What am I going to do about it?

This is how we become doers and not just hearers of what God is saying.

INTRODUCTION TO PROVERBS

Solomon was known as the wisest man who ever lived. People travelled from far and wide to both test and glean from his incredible insight into life and the things pertaining to it. His writings are simple yet profound, spiritual yet deeply practical. I'm not sure if any of us could afford to pay this man's professional fees, but the Holy Spirit allows us to get his wisdom for free.

The Hebrew word for proverb is 'mashal' and it can mean several things, one being 'poetry'. One of my old mentors, who is long gone, used to put it this way, "*A proverb is a short saying derived from long experience.*" I love that.

So here we go. Pour the coffee, grab your Bible and don't forget your journal. Enjoy!

Phil

Live

King Solomon ruled the nation of Israel for 40 years, bringing peace and wealth to the nation. During that time, he wrote many proverbs – 3,000 of them actually (1 Kings 4:29-34), many of which are in this book. There are many dangers for a person who refuses wisdom and Proverbs explains these dangers. Solomon tells us about four types of people who will benefit from his wise words: (1) The simple person; God wants the simple person to learn His wisdom that begins when we invite God into our lives. (2) Young people; fathers taught them to their sons and mothers taught them to their daughters. Grandchildren learned them from their grandparents and they actually tested the children’s memories. (3) The wise person; *“They love God’s law and are always thinking about it.”* Psalm 1:2. (4) The intelligent person; like the wise person, the intelligent person wants to learn and will ask for advice, always trying to understand God’s ways.

Solomon uses a couple of stories to illustrate his point. The first is about a young man who set his sights on all the wrong things. He thought that he would become wealthy, but in reality, he lost everything. In the second story, Solomon compares wisdom to a woman who is upset and angry, shouting at everyone who is not obeying her. She walks through the streets and complains to everyone. She even goes to the city gate (where judges sat in ancient times), and obtains a judgement against those who ignore her. The punishment is sudden like a storm, and powerful like the wind.

One of the things I’ve noticed is that not everyone gets wiser with age. There is a myth that experience brings wisdom. Not so, I say. Rather, *evaluated* experience brings wisdom. How about making a coffee, getting your journal, and evaluating some of the stuff you’ve been through. Ask God what you can learn from it. What a great exercise this would be. You’ll be wiser. I promise.

Pray

Father, thank You for the wisdom of Solomon in this book for me to glean from. It’s a great time to be alive, for even as there’s growing turmoil in the world, there’s unruffled triumph in heaven, a certainty that the gospel will win the day, the nations, and the cosmos. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

Wisdom is such an important topic and is vital for life. We must listen to it and desire it, asking questions so we can learn more. We must hunt for wisdom like someone who searches for gold. Psalm 42:1,2a says, *“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for You, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”* This isn’t Bambi looking for a refreshing drink; this deer searches for water to preserve its life, and so must we search for wisdom. If we respect God, He will give His wisdom to us.

In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus compared life to a journey when He said, *“Enter by the narrow gate! Do not choose the wide gate or the easy road! Many people go that way. The easy road leads to death. Look for the small gate and the narrow road. Only a few people find it, but it leads to life.”* In Proverbs today, Solomon tells us about two ways: verse 13 – evil men walk in dark paths, hiding from the light because light would show up their evil behaviour; and verse 9 – if we follow God’s wisdom, then our paths are good and we are like travellers who choose the right way. We know where we are going. We act fairly. Our decisions are good, and, verse 19 tells us, they lead to life.

I find it interesting that Solomon would include the wisdom of staying alert when it comes to sexual purity (verses 16-19). One of the Ten Commandments was to not commit adultery: *“Do not have sex with someone else’s wife or husband, whether in deed or in thought.”* (Deuteronomy 5:18). It’s sad to note that Solomon, who wrote this chapter in Proverbs, turned away from God because of his many wives, some of whom followed other religions and eventually stole his heart away from God. The Bible says that Solomon’s actions were evil (1 Kings 11:1-13). We should learn from Solomon’s mistake and maintain sexual purity at all costs.

Pray

Father, help me maintain my purity. Keep my mind fixed on You day and night. Help me by Your beautiful Holy Spirit to choose the right paths and to always honour You with my life, thoughts and practices. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

Today begins, as usual, with advice for Solomon's son to allow wisdom to enter his heart, guide his thoughts, and control his emotions and desires. True health is not only the health of the body, but also of one's relationship with God. Love and trust should always be with us. As Solomon writes this, I imagine he is thinking about Deuteronomy 6:7-9 *"Teach God's law to your children. Talk about God's law at home! Talk about it when you travel! Talk about it when you lie down! Talk about it when you wake! Tie the words of God's law on your hands! Tie the words about your head! Write God's law at the side of your doors and gates!"*

Verses 5 and 6 in today's chapter were my Dad's favourite, quoted at every family wedding without fail. They are very important verses to learn. *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight."* People trust many things: money, governments, luck, or fate. You might trust your family or your church, but all these things sometimes fail. God never fails and He encourages us to trust Him in everything. We may know many things, but God knows everything. He encourages us to not lay trust in our wealth, but to honour God with it. In Malachi 3:6-12, the prophet accuses the people of stealing from God because they have not given their gifts for God's work. The truth is that all our possessions belong to God, so we should be generous and give for God's work, especially helping the poor. As we give to other people, God gives good things to us. God is our father. A father must sometimes correct or punish as he teaches his son. In the same way, God corrects us.

When we walk with wisdom, our life is more pleasant and beautiful. Let's be careful who we follow, remembering Hebrews 12:2 *"Looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher"*.

Pray

Father, I praise You in the times of trouble, on the crooked, dark, winding paths, and in the down-in-the-dumps days when I look to something or someone to trust. What relief, peace and assurance to know that You, alone, are trustworthy. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

Solomon's family was Israel's royal family, yet he does not teach his son about being a king. In this passage about priorities, he does not speak about wealth and money, nor does he explain how to lead the nation. For this father, only one thing matters: his son must learn wisdom. Wisdom is better than everything else; better than money; better than beauty; better than health; and worth more than everything you own.

Solomon draws a contrast between a good person and an evil person. I often miss my mum's wise counsel; she would say, "Son, be careful, you think everyone is like you!" Sometimes we think everyone is the same as us, thinking everyone is good. The Bible says that we have all turned from God and must turn back to Him because He alone can make us good.

Each of the first seven chapters in Proverbs begins in a similar style. Here, the subject is health, referring to wisdom like a medicine because wisdom improves our lives, heals our spirits, and leads us to God. The writer continues to lead us to examine our thought life and processes. Comparing life to a journey, he says we will live 'the best life' if we obey God.

I love the wisdom that only God can bring, but I also appreciate good friends. I cannot imagine how storms can be navigated and hardships handled without a few good friends. Join me in thanking God for the gift of friendship. When we walk through difficult seasons, we are inclined to think, "No one can possibly understand what I'm going through or relate to my feelings and confusion. Everyone would handle this mess much better than I do." Those are the times when it's easy to withdraw into isolation, fall into the pit of condemnation, and reach for some ill-chosen medication. That's when the gift of long-standing, all-weather friends becomes especially precious. It's wonderful to hear our friends say these two words: "Me too." Thank God for friends who know how to refresh the hearts of the saints, including this saint!

Pray

Father, I praise You for friends who remind me of the truth and power of the gospel, the love of Jesus, and the bigger story You are always writing. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
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Live

Solomon begins in the usual way, reminding us why we need wisdom and knowledge: to avoid danger. In his lesson, a married woman attracts a young man. She appears so beautiful that when he kisses her, her lips seem to taste like honey. When he listens to her, her words are attractive, but he does not think about the woman's husband, nor does he think about God's law. He does not even think about the results of his actions; he only thinks about her. This sort of behaviour never has a good result. It ends in carnage, even death. Solomon advises his son to not meet with the married woman; he must be very careful to not enter her house or even walk near her door.

These verses in Proverbs teach us the result of living for our desires alone. Paul wrote about sex in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. He said, *"Your body does not belong to you. Jesus bought your body, for a price. Therefore, use your body to give honour to God."* The language here is quite explicit and encourages a married couple to enjoy the sex life that God has blessed them with, allowing each other to explore what that means for them, but always to make sure their love and sex keep contained to their marriage bed. Marriage is God's gift and a husband and wife should give themselves to each other, for this is good. An affair is always wrong. One may think that nobody knows, but this is so wrong because God knows. He sees our secret actions. He knows everything we do in private.

The last little section contains strong language. The evil man thinks that he is free, but actually he is a captive. He can hide his actions from people, but he cannot hide from God, and his evil behaviour will destroy him. Maybe today you need to ask for forgiveness, and if you don't, then you certainly need to ask for protection against sexual sin. It would be good today to take some time out and find a quiet place to do one or the other, or both.

Pray

Father, free me today from importing past failures into my present moment. Free me from holding myself and others hostage to the destructive power of shame. Free me from not believing the gospel, Lord Jesus, for myself and others. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

I love the title in my Bible for this chapter, 'Lessons for daily life'. We have all done wrong things against God, but if we want freedom, then we must not be lazy. We must not delay until tomorrow because if we delay, we might never take action. Today, along with other things, Solomon hits the massive subject of laziness. Using the illustration of the ants, he encourages us to be proactive and not slothful. In 2 Thessalonians 3:10-13, some Christians refused to work and the church gave them food, but Paul told the church not to do this. *"If a man will not work, then he shall not eat."* He then added, *"Do not get too tired to do the right things."* Obviously, this is talking about laziness and not about sickness or an inability to work.

It would be good to consider the seven things that God hates and allow God to search our hearts and redeem us from ourselves. Here they are: haughty eyes (pride and arrogance), a liar, a murderer, an evil thinker, troublemakers, falseness, and people who create disunity. It's a pretty freaky list of things that can creep in on any soul, hence the writer is warning of their subtlety. Interestingly, he hits on the issue of morality again. Remember the question asked and answered in Psalm 24:3,4 – *"Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in His holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god."*

My prayer often is not just to keep me from sin but also to keep me from myself. I don't want to live with just a theoretical or theological awareness of being God's dearly loved child. I'm sure you're like me and you want your relationship with God to be deeply experiential and personal, very real, very encouraging, and very liberating. That's why I love Zephaniah 3:17, *"The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in His love He will no longer rebuke you but will rejoice over you with singing."* Him, singing over us today ... beautiful!

Pray

Father, give me the power I will need today to rid myself of any of the things You hate. Convict me of the ways I grieve You by my attitudes and actions, and free me to love and serve You today. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
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Live

Today we enter the third chapter dealing with immorality and looseness sexually. The New Testament has much to say on the subject as well, showing us how important our sexual purity is to God. Is it any wonder it seems to be the biggest source of twisting and destruction by the enemy, who obviously knows how important it is to the Father, and how feeble and weak we are in this area? Solomon tells his son to treasure his advice and guard it like you would guard the apple of your eye, speaking of the very pupil. He then presents a pretty seductive story that, may I remind you, was written three thousand years ago by the same man who told us there is nothing new under the sun. I think he was right!

One of the major lessons today is that evil is never far from any one of us. It lurks at our door, waiting to pounce on the heart that wanders ever so slightly from God. The little phrase, *“she approached him”* caught me as I read this chapter. If you stray, remember this please, evil is out there looking for you, it never just stays at its home. It is out there wandering, and is going to try to take hold of you, in fact, verse 13 says just that, *“She took hold of him and kissed him and with a brazen face she said...”* Evil is bold and brazen, trying to seduce you, to take hold of you, to lure you in. Notice a couple of things. Firstly, the religious language, *“I have fellowship offerings at home; today I fulfilled my vows”*. How often sin cloaks itself in religion, trying to hide behind noble causes, hide behind things that sound good or look really righteous. Secondly, *“So I came out to meet you; I looked for you and have found you”*! It makes you feel special, targeting pride, ego, and self, all the while this poor boy is being sucked into a quagmire that will eat him up and destroy him. Again, pretty strong lessons today from the wisest man in all the world. It would be wise to take heed!

Pray

Father, let Your Word dwell in me richly today and every day. I know while sin will keep me from Your Word, the opposite is also true; Your Word will keep me from sin. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

Up until now Solomon has been guiding us around two massively important topics – wisdom and morality; both very beautiful when used correctly and in a Godly fashion, and yet both so destructive when ignored. I love how the writer depicts wisdom calling out who she is, what she does, how she was formed and when. This is beautiful poetry around the subject of wisdom, which James, in the New Testament, tells us God will give in liberal amounts if we ask for it, and never cast up that we asked for it. I'm not sure about you, but I'm going to be asking for a truckload of wisdom today!

We all know wisdom is not literally a woman who speaks eloquently about herself and prepares a banquet, rather it is a quality of the soul. I think the writer's whole purpose here is to praise and exalt wisdom. He invents a fictional creation story in which wisdom, as an attribute of God, was actually present. I must admit I love the imagination from verse 22 onwards. While Proverbs 3:19 tells us *"the Lord by wisdom founded the earth"*, this chapter turns that statement into a fictional story in which wisdom becomes personified. She watches on in the beginning as God created the mountains, horizons, heavens and beyond. There is no doubt that wisdom is being displayed here as God's delight and it is by the power of that delight that God created the world, culminating in God's precious and special creation, humanity. Wisdom draws human beings into such a relationship with God.

A few simple conclusions can be drawn from this chapter. It is wisdom to seek the Lord. The way of wisdom is tried and tested. God's wisdom gives us an understanding of how the world works. And wisdom opens your eyes and heart to see who alone can make you happy. Solomon sets wisdom before us with such imagination to motivate us to pursue it, and if wisdom can deliver what it promises, we'd be foolish not to chase it I think!

Pray

Father, I bend my knee and receive Your truth. I open my ears to receive Your counsel. I open my heart to receive Your eternal wisdom. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
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Live

What incredible insight this book of Proverbs gives us for everyday life. I love that the Bible is so loaded with inspiration and hope. God's call to us throughout Proverbs is, above all, to be wise. Today, we get three big issues, two of which are personified. First, we see wisdom introduced as a magnificent queen who is full of splendour and generosity. In our previous chapter, we saw, through the lens of wisdom, the grandeur and glory of God as the Creator of the world, and this chapter shows His grace and goodness as the Redeemer of it. He is our *Jehovah Jirah*, the Lord my Provider, and the richness of this is unsurpassed. This lady wisdom's house is a beautiful and solidly constructed mansion. She has set her table with an abundance of delicious foods and sends her young women out to invite guests to this feast. She invites the simple, the uncommitted, the ones who lack sense, to come and take a place at her banquet table. Verse 10 says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It would be a good exercise today to think about the pieces of your life where the fear of the Lord has slipped. Usually it will be an 'out of whack' area or a place we have stopped really challenging in ourselves. Write it down, consider it, and talk to God about it.

Next, we are introduced to the mocker, the individual absolutely set in their ways, which, of course, are Godless. There is no point in trying to reason with this person as they have set themselves against any advice or Godly wisdom and will not consider it. In fact, the opposite is true, they choose to attack it rather than receive it, let alone submit their life to it.

Lastly, we are introduced to lady folly in verse 13. She is loud, seductive, stupid and lazy. If we accept wisdom, we get her attributes, and the same goes for lady folly. If we are lured down her path, her destructive ways lead to death.

Pray

Father, help me to be wise with my time with You, my relationships, my finances, my health, on and on I could go. Just help me to display wisdom as a chief characteristic in my life. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
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Live

With the rather lengthy introduction in the first nine chapters over, we now head into the second major section in the book of Proverbs: chapters 10 to 22. These contain no less than 375 short nuggets of wisdom, which someone has described as poems. They are probably not how we would see a poem as each have only two lines and are only one verse long. These little nuggets are mostly comparisons, like one coin with two sides. The writer gives us much wisdom and ‘rubber meets the road’ advice in just a couple of lines. The structure of this section is hard to figure out as Solomon did not separate the proverbs into groups. They twist and twirl, changing from one subject to another, similar to a conversation. For example, one proverb might explain the previous one or another proverb might contrast with the previous one. Solomon writes as he might talk, I suppose, but whatever his method, he was obviously smarter than you or me, so let’s get into these and allow them to filter through our lives.

It is difficult to write on these little parallel lines as they are profoundly wise, yet amazingly simple and self-explanatory. Solomon starts by looking at the joys and griefs of parenthood, then quickly jumps into living well regarding wealth, and then the rewards for Godliness and hard work. We really need to pray that God will instruct us, give us wisdom, and teach us in the way we should go, that He would direct our steps and attune our ears to hear His voice. We should be quick to hear and listen, and slow to speak, allowing ourselves to be led by His hand that guides us down the way He would have us to go. God speaks in many different ways, so it is important that we will recognise it is Him. We need to hear and recognise His voice, and do His will, realising that we need His abiding presence desperately in every aspect of our lives today. May our rule of life be that which was written in Proverbs 3:6 ‘In all my ways I will acknowledge Him, and He will direct my paths.’

Pray

Father, thank You for the wisdom displayed in Solomon’s writings, and thank You for giving me the wisdom to believe and trust in You, knowing I can rely on You for everything! In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

I worked as a coalman in the 80's and had the first verse of today's chapter written over my weighing machinery for weighing out the coal. This industry, like many others, had all kinds of dishonest goings on. Solomon uses his contrasting for those who use honest scales against those who use scales that have been fiddled with to give the owner an advantage. To help us understand what this means for us today, we must understand what the scales were used for in Old Testament times. Most people earned their living from crops or animals. Some may have been engaged in both, but most were either a farmer in the field or a herdsman at the market. Scales were used then as they are still used in many industries today, albeit more electronically driven, but the same principle. People traded, they bought and sold items based upon their weight, so the scales were a key factor, determining value. It was a common practice for unscrupulous vendors to alter their scales, overcharging. The customer would pay more for an item than it was worth, allowing the trader to acquire monies in a dishonest fashion. This practice goes way back in history, God telling His people to avoid this sort of ill-gotten gain: *"Don't try to cheat people by having two sets of weights or measures, one to get more when you are buying, and the other to give less when you are selling."* (Deuteronomy 25:13,14). God was pointing out to His chosen people that they should not participate in the unrighteous practices of the world. Solomon takes it up again here and is saying, 'Come on now, let there be something different about us. We should be known as honest, industrious, and hard-working men and women of integrity.'

Let's be people who can hold our heads high in our businesses and jobs, schools and universities. When our character is out-flanked by our giftedness, then we are on a downward spiral that will overtake us at some stage.

Pray

Father, how integrity has become a word much forgotten in the world of wheeling and dealing. May I be known for my righteous acts and for my honesty before people, but more importantly before my Father, Who sees all things. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
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Live

You've got to love a person who admits their mistakes, someone who is not afraid to be a little bit vulnerable. We have heard a lot about wisdom in these proverbs. Wisdom needs to be applied when we share our weaknesses as we have to choose the right person to share with. It is admirable to be teachable and to take correction when it is needed. If we can't accept discipline and correction, Solomon suggests that it actually means we hate knowledge and wisdom. We would say in our wee country that such a person is 'not wise'.

When you see a righteous person, it is like looking at a giant oak tree with deep, deep roots. They will not be easily moved, even though the winds of false doctrine are strong. In the parable of the sowing of the seed in Luke 8, Jesus tells us the seed that fell on good ground had good roots and brought forth much fruit. In today's reading, verse 7 reminds us of the famous story in Matthew 7 regarding the wise man and the foolish man. One built on rock; the other on sand. It intrigues me that the exact same winds and storm blew and beat upon each house, but the one with the rock foundation stood firm, while the other got washed away. Foundations are of great importance when it comes to the sustainability and longevity of any structure. The same is true of any person. What we build our life and faith upon is of utmost importance.

There is an interesting statement in verse 25, *"Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad."* It is said that doctors believe 80% of illness is caused by anxiety, and 80% of the things we worry about never come to pass. Seems like an awful waste of time, energy, and health. In contrast to that, psychologists say it takes around fifteen positive comments to make up for one negative comment. Who could you encourage today? Go on, make a phone call or something as simple as sending a text to build up and exhort someone to greatness.

Pray

Father, open my mind and heart that I may always bring life and joy to others. Help me to realise that diversity doesn't necessarily mean division. We can celebrate our differences. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
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What am I going to do about it?

Live

There is a lot we could chat about today in this chapter, but let's look at our words. Scripture tells us that the power of life and death is in our tongue, James reminding us that our tongue is like the rudder of a ship or a bit in a horse's mouth, steering the course of our very lives. The quality of our words reveals the content of our heart. The image throughout the Bible is that while our tongues are just a little member, they can wreak havoc and destruction. Jesus put it well, *"The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him."* (Matthew 12:35). In other words, a good man speaks from the well of good deep within and opens himself to life, goodness, and blessing. The opposite is also true. A wicked man speaks from the evil in his heart, opening the door to destruction, deceit, and even death.

It is daunting that someday we will all stand before a holy God and give an account for everything we have ever said. While that scares the wits out of me, it's not just that thought that frightens me, it's the devastation I have observed in people's lives through reckless, ill-conceived words. There is an old saying that is so totally untrue, 'Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.' Absolutely false! There is not a person reading this that hasn't been hurt by a spoken word. The Apostle Paul said in Ephesians 4:29, *"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."* What an incredible piece of truth. Not only will wholesome words bless others, but they will also sow seeds of greatness in the soil of your own soul that will make you grow into a tree of righteousness, a right old royal oak!

Pray

Father, I declare, by faith, that I take authority over my mind so that my heart is filled with the right things. Then my words will be only words that are pleasing to You, words that build up and never tear down. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

Today Solomon takes on a subject into which most men fear to tread! He brings a striking contrast between a wise woman and a foolish woman. He tells us the wise woman builds her home not in a house-proud manner, but in diligence and perseverance. The foolish woman, on the other hand, reduces her home to rubble with her own bare hands. Ladies, today can I exhort you, as a daughter of the King, as a royal princess and a woman of God, seek to be a blessing to your family. Whether you are a professional worker, stay-at-home mum, or still in your studies, walk in a way that honours your family and friends, and, most of all, your God.

The rest of the chapter offers wisdom and advice to male and female alike. Faithfulness and integrity are great character traits that we must pursue with all our might, being careful to associate with those who have them. When others trust you or depend on you, it is your duty and privilege to be faithful and fulfil their needs as much as possible. It doesn't take us too long in the reading of the Scriptures to understand that God expects us to operate in truth and honesty instead of lies and deceit.

One verse that captures my interest in this chapter is verse 27 with the emphasis on the *"fear of the Lord"*. Solomon calls this a *"life giving fountain"*. I love this thought. The word 'fear' used here means a reverential attitude, one that brings awesome rewards. Beautiful indeed. So, what does this mean for us today? It means that if you truly want to grow in the things of God, the Father will give you every opportunity to do so through the power of the Holy Spirit. Part of the role of the Holy Spirit is to reveal to you the things of God. Paul explained this to the church at Corinth when he said, *"We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us."* (1 Corinthians 2:12).

Pray

Father, today I pray the prayer of Jabez from 1 Chronicles 4:10 *"Oh that You would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let Your hand be with me and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain."* In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

Here we go again, Solomon labouring the importance of our speech. I'm intrigued by how many mentions there are of the tongue, words, the lips, and the mouth throughout Proverbs, and actually, the Bible as a whole. God loves peacemakers, which has an awful lot to do with the way we talk, and He blesses them greatly. Proverbs 15:1 is one of the best you can use every day for God's blessing. The wisdom is simple. If someone is angry, use gentle speech to calm them. Do not use defensive or harsh words, for that will increase anger. How can there be a fight if one person turns the other cheek (which of course Jesus endorses in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5)? We are taught a rare and unusual wisdom by Solomon's greatest descendant, Jesus Christ! Rather than hate and fight personal enemies, Jesus taught a new way – love them, bless them, do good to them, and pray for them.

The simplest explanation of any of the proverbs is this: getting one's priorities right. The wisest and richest king who ever lived gave inspired insight into living life to the full. Solomon experimented extensively with everything possible, comparing all things and their results for you, so you can avoid the perplexity and pain of a misguided life. He immersed himself in every pursuit from knowledge to pleasure, from construction to partying. He had 1,000 women, and accumulated wealth and properties until he was the richest in the world. He tried everything and assessed the outcomes, so his analysis of life is invaluable. What was Solomon's conclusion after testing every possible means for human happiness and purpose? We find it in verse 16, *"Better to have little with the fear of the Lord, than to have great treasure and inner turmoil."* Who cares what you have in the bank if you don't have a relationship with God and His Son, Jesus Christ? I am blown away as I read of the many martyrs in history who would not bow to any man as their fear and love of the Lord and His word consumed them, even unto death.

Pray

Father, help me to be a peacemaker, one who may not always be a *peacekeeper*, but one who speaks the truth in love. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

Do you ever think like I do, that in our natural state we actually don't realise how evil we are? I know for me, I am prone to judge others for things that I am guilty of myself. Remember, none of us pass God's test for holiness, for, as Paul reminds us in Romans 3:23, we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Praise God for Romans 6:23 that tells us the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord. We are told in Proverbs today that we can plan all we want, but unless we are following what God wants, we cannot expect Him to just run in and bolster up what we are doing. Psalm 127:1 says that those who build do so in vain unless God is building the house, so it has to be His plans, not ours. Arrogance, pride, and self-sufficiency are not good traits and when they creep into our souls, they take all our dependence away from our only true source, Jesus. If you ever thought that you could be complete without Christ, you are so wrong. We are reminded in Matthew 16:26 that it profits a man nothing to gain the whole world and yet lose his soul.

Verse 31 tells us of the value of grey hair, which I love. I'd have loved it more if mine had hung around long enough to go grey! Solomon is saying that grey hair should be a sign of wisdom gained over the course of a life. There is nothing inherently noble in getting old or having grey hair unless it is accompanied by a growing and deepening relationship with God, from whom all wisdom derives. As I said before (in the Proverbs 1 reading), experience is not necessarily the best teacher. That would mean people would get better as they got older, and I know some who have got older and bitter, not better. Rather, *evaluated* experience is by far the best teacher. Looking back over past events and learning from them, thinking, how could I have played that better, how could I have showed more wisdom, love and discretion? Now, *that* is getting better with age!

Pray

Father, today I open my heart to You who sees all things and knows all things. Thank You, Father, that You know the worst about me and love me anyway. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

One of my favourite verses is in this chapter, verse 17, *“A friend loves at all times”*. A true friend never fails, no matter what. A true friend is always ready to help in time of need or trouble. As Solomon describes friends, I like to ask myself two things. Am I such a friend to others? And do I have such friends around me? In my study of Scripture over the years, I have discovered this about good friends: they share in our successes, they help when we fall, they provide encouragement, and they help oppose enemies. Such friends are not found easily; they are a blessing from God and must be carefully preserved by a very conscious choice. The Scripture tells us (in tomorrow’s chapter) that we have a friend who sticks closer than a brother. This is the One who told us that He didn’t call us servants for a servant doesn’t know what his master is doing, but rather He calls us friends. How beautiful is that, the Master and Creator of all the universe calls us friends! If you need comfort today, that should definitely help.

Much of today’s reading is around poor judgement, quarrelling, a crooked heart, etc. We need to learn how to manage the pressures of life. We must learn what to do and how to release the pressure when it comes. In our society today, people are under tremendous stress, and under extreme pressure to do so many different things. More and more people suffer from anxiety, nervous breakdowns, road rage, drug addiction, alcohol addictions, etc. Suicide is more prevalent today than ever before, and people come to the point of exploding because they have not learned to release the pressures that have built up in their lives. I love that Solomon tells us the flip side to all the negatives: love, a cheerful heart, using few words, being even-tempered. He says that even fools seem wise when they keep silent. I love this final verse!

Pray

Father, today I read how corrupt hearts will never prosper and I am reminded of the desperate need to stay ever close to You. Verse 24 tells me that a discerning heart will keep wisdom in view, so today, Father, I fix my eyes on You; help me to lock them there. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

It is important to keep reminding yourself of something an old mentor told me years ago: the proverbs are not promises; they are principles. That means they must be applied if they are ever going to work. We could chat from now until Jesus returns about wisdom, but if it is not applied as a skill for living, it remains a fairy tale. Wisdom is the capacity to discern good from evil when there are no obvious rules to go by. Wisdom tells us if God is not in His rightful place in our hearts and lives. Guess who we insert in His place. Ourselves. We make our relationships all about us. Self-love and ambition to gratify our flesh become the driving force, rather than seeking first the Kingdom of God and His right ways. When we get to this point, we start to expect from others what only God can give, which always leads to disappointment. When we get this priority sorted and put God in His rightful place, then we can bond with true friends without expecting them to be God, something that is absolutely essential for our growth and development.

I remember when my wife died suddenly after twenty seven years of marriage, there were some songs I just couldn't sing, like this little line, referring of course to God: "You are all I need". I knew and understood the theology of it, but I would often say to God in that season of my life, "God, I love You with all my heart and I want to seek You first, but I need someone with skin on!" I was reading recently in 2 Timothy 4 about a really difficult season in the Apostle Paul's life when a friend called Demas betrayed him and let him down. Demas had been through a lot with Paul, but had now abandoned and forsaken him. I'm sure you have your own story to tell. Your own experience with this sort of person has probably made you hesitant. Perhaps you have even closed your heart to starting new friendships. Don't give up on friendship. Just be careful and put them in the right place!

Pray

Father, as Hannah's prayer rightly suggests in 1 Samuel 2:1-2, "*There is none besides You, nor is there any rock like our God.*" I worship You today for who You are. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

My dad used to say sincerity is one thing, but a person can also be sincerely wrong. Have you ever met someone whom you could see was heading to destruction? Actually, a blind man on a galloping horse could have seen it, but they were so unaware of the path they were on and there was no talking to them. Mere zeal, zest, and bravado will not suffice to keep one on the right path. This reminds me of Jonah who just didn't seem to sit down and think out the path he was careering down until he found himself in the belly of a big fish in the bottom of an ocean! At that point his only option was God. Verse 21 today says, *"Many are the plans of a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purposes that prevail."* Of course we all have plans and there's nothing wrong with planning, but we need to ask, where does God come in? Psalm 127 reminds us that unless the Lord builds the house, those who build labour in vain. We cannot do a thing without God's counsel having approved it in eternity past. God says you didn't choose Him, but rather He chose you. I love that, even though it plays all kinds of havoc with my brain. Try wrapping your head around this, Ephesians 1:4 states, *"For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will."* This incredible choice of life, and all other important choices affecting your life, was made for you, so you'd better humble yourself now and worship your glorious Sovereign. He is the reason you exist and with His plan drawn up for you in eternity past, it would be a good idea to bow your knee before Him in reverence and fear and seek out that plan. Ephesians 2:10, *"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."*

Pray

Father, today I pray the prayer of a strong man, a man who failed to recognise the source of his supernatural strength. Samson died blind and imprisoned, but prior to his death he cried these words, *"O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me..."* (Judges 16:28). In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
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Live

How does wine mock? How does strong drink rage or, as the New Living Translation puts it, lead to brawls? How does it deceive men and make them unwise? Solomon uses powerful language to warn against excessive drinking and drunkenness. Oh the agonies, the broken hearts, the torn lives, the lost souls that have been the result of failing to heed the warning of the opening verse of this chapter. I firmly believe no other thing has so cursed the world and caused such awful misery and suffering as alcohol. The victims of alcohol have been numbered in hundreds of millions, yet the devil has no difficulty in persuading thousands of young people to start on the same fearful road that has lured many to their ruin. Alcohol is a causal factor in more than 60 medical conditions, including: mouth, throat, stomach, liver and breast cancers; high blood pressure; cirrhosis of the liver; and depression. Alcohol alone costs the NHS £3.5 billion per year. In the UK in 2014-5, there were an estimated 1.1 million hospital admissions where an alcohol-related disease, injury or condition was the primary or secondary reason for hospital admission. In the same period there were 339,000 admissions for conditions directly caused by alcohol. Males accounted for approximately 65% of all alcohol-related deaths in the UK in 2014. Scary stats.

Now listen, I don't want to be legalistic here, but verse 1 has always been a daunting verse for me. I hear people say, "There's no harm in taking a drink," or "One wouldn't do anyone any harm." All of which could be true, but, alas, one is never enough, and I have never heard anyone say one drink made them more like Jesus! I had an uncle who died from alcohol poisoning. I heard him say once that it started with a nice wee pint of cool cider on a warm day. Hear me. Play with fire long enough and you will get burned.

Pray

Father, today's prayer to You is one from the Apostle Paul himself who cried, *"For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man"*. (Ephesians 3:14-16) In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
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Live

Another conglomeration of truth and wisdom today! Guarding your heart and ruling your speech will save you from so much trouble. Your heart and tongue are two of your greatest assets and also your greatest enemies. If you will keep them under control and only speak the right words at the right time, your life will be blessed. You will lose all integrity and get into all kinds of trouble by dirty jokes and talking about others unwisely. You can damage your reputation, hurt others' feelings, and waste time with such talking. Pray like David, *"Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips!"* (Psalm 141:3).

Solomon takes a section today to talk about riches made by good old honest hard work, comparing it to wealth gained by lying and deceit that will bring difficulty and shame. The story is told of a man lost in a desert, hungry and dying of thirst. He came on a bag that had been dropped at a recent camping ground. Lifting the bag, he found it full of pearls, which he discarded as 'only pearls'. While their worth was thousands of pounds, they were of no value to him when he needed life-giving water. So it is with wealth that we get through deceit and lying; it will not satisfy.

I love these writings coming from the experience and failures of Solomon. I find that we can expect to be put to the test in those areas where we seem to be strongest, like people who write books on raising children; they usually haven't raised theirs yet, and will be likely tested in this area. Many years ago when I first church planted, I recall people telling me how I should control and discipline my children, and everything in me wanted to say, "You haven't earned the right to tell me how to do that just yet." Remember, wisdom is not just the knowledge of certain truths, but the obedient practice of them.

Pray

Father, today I pray with Daniel: *"It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me. How great are His signs, how mighty His wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and His dominion endures from generation to generation."* (Daniel 4:3). In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
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Live

Many years ago, I planned to put a little extension on my home. When I went for building approval, it became evident that a neighbour had moved his fence five foot into my plot. Little did he know, but he had covered the whole drainage system for my property. He was hesitant to give it back, but when building control made him aware he was breaking the law, he soon reneged. For that one reason, I love verse 28, *“Do not move an ancient boundary stone set up by your ancestors.”* It is quite a cute little proverb with huge ramifications. Solomon is saying never compromise your integrity in any business dealings, especially not in a subtle, sneaky manner which would defraud another person of their property. It turned out that my nice neighbour had taken my property little by little, year by year, quite unnoticed by me. The lesson in Proverbs is taken from the old custom of leaving landmarks to distinguish property lines. In open fields where property lines met, custom called for a small ditch, a pile of stones, or some other semi-permanent marker to identify the boundaries. These markers would be used for identifying property, valuing an inheritance, settling an estate, and so on. People of low scruples could, and would, easily move such markers at night to increase their field extensively, stealing property from their neighbour.

Integrity is calling to me today! Here is another funny story which involves a friend. I lent him a spade to dig his garden one autumn. In the spring, as I began to get my garden into shape, I asked him for my spade. We were standing in his garage where my spade was hanging pride of place on his wall. “Oh, I don’t have your spade,” he said. “That is my spade.” He’d had it so long he’d claimed ownership. I reckoned my friendship was more important than a spade, so he still has it. I know they are just funny stories, but the moral of the day is: integrity, integrity, integrity.

Pray

Father, today’s prayer comes from another Old Testament prophet who cried out, *“O Lord, revive Thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.”* (Habakkuk 3:2). Thank You for Your incredible mercy found in Christ. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
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Live

Again, one of my favourite sayings is in today's reading, *"My son, if your heart is wise, then my heart will be glad indeed; my inmost being will rejoice when your lips speak what is right."* I love this exhortation of a wise and loving father to his child, which I think absolutely concurs with that of a wise and loving God to His children. There are three steps to success and prosperity that please earthly fathers and the heavenly Father: you must hear the instruction of truth and knowledge; you must choose that wisdom as your own; you must direct your affections and choices accordingly. If you never had such an earthly father, you do have a heavenly One! You must first hear truth and wisdom. You arrived in life foolish, helpless, ignorant, irresponsible, and rebellious. You needed an incredible amount of pampering, tenderness, and instruction to learn the simplest facts. Your potential in life was, and is, totally dependent on the amount of instruction available to you. Many people remain ignorant of basic knowledge and understanding because they have no teachers. However, if you are reading this proverb and these notes, then God has given you teachers to lead you to this moment. What will you do with the instruction? Everything depends on your response. Will you skim these words in a few seconds and forget them? Or will you consider them?

Sometimes we take way too much for granted; we indulge an attitude of entitlement, live with an assumed right to things that the poor of the world would consider luxuries, and live at a pace of life which makes it easy to keep on going without saying, "Thank You". It would be good to repent today, and to express heart-felt gratitude for the wide array of things we would never have if God weren't so generous. Praise Him for giving us such gifts, each of which He intends for us to greatly enjoy and freely share.

Pray

Father, today my prayer is one of Nehemiah's: *"I beseech Thee, O Lord God of heaven the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and loving-kindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant..."* (Nehemiah 1:5,6). In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

Today the opening verse rings in my ears. It's one that I have been guilty of thinking about way too much. How often we see evil prosper, and, if you're like me, you have wondered, how can this be? But guess what, Hollywood lies. Please don't compare yourself with someone else on Facebook world. There is a God in heaven and He punishes evil severely. He will have the last laugh at rebellion against Him and His Word. Those who are openly opposing God, their happiness is feigned; their success an illusion; their long-term prosperity a delusion. Fix your eyes on Jesus, the AUTHOR and FINISHER of your faith. Oh, I love this thought. When our eyes wander to people, turn them quickly to the Saviour! Let's thank God for wherever we are and whatever state we are in. Praise Him for what you have. It may be for your treasured family or your precious friends. Praise Him for a bed and the gift of sleep; for a fridge with plenty of food in it; for the cup of hot coffee you're sipping, and the laptop or phone by which you might be reading this today; for a thermostat to make the room feel good, and a thermometer to use when you feel bad; for the assurance God really likes and enjoys you, and the peace that He will bring His good work to completion in you. Thank God for being so astonishingly generous with us, far more so than we ever deserved.

In Proverbs, ignorance is not bliss, and while simplicity is not necessarily sin, it can easily lead to it. Matthew 10:16 is one of my many great verses that I have cherished in leadership: *"be wise as serpents and harmless as doves."* God does not want us to look at the world through rose-coloured glasses. We are to see people for what they are, and sin for what it is. We can live with righteousness and wisdom only as we view life as it really is. The book of Proverbs is a book of real things, real life, real people, and we should view and read it as such.

Pray

Father, today my prayer comes from the depths of despair in the words of Jonah, *"I called out of my distress to the Lord, and He answered me. I cried for help from the depth of Sheol; You heard my voice."* (Jonah 2:2). In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

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Live

I love the last verse in this chapter: *“Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control.”* In Solomon’s time, walls and gates around a city displayed its strength against the enemy. If the gates or towers were broken down and the walls taken away, a city was flung open to any enemy that wished to take, plunder, and conquer it. This is why Nehemiah wept when he heard about the state of the walls of the once majestic city, Jerusalem. He knew it didn’t stand a chance and it could easily be captured. Solomon is comparing this image to our life, which will be plundered and wasted unless we take control and raise a defence. Then, you will become what the Apostle Paul once described as a ‘castaway’, for an unruly spirit does not produce good things for God or mankind. This will creep up on you like a thief in the night, my friend, so repair the walls, take heed to the gates, build your defences strong.

Our worst enemy is the selfish person inside us. It causes the most damage and keeps us from all successes in life. The most shameful loss is to live and die the victim of our own unruly spirit, and the most noble and rewarding victory is the one over our own spirit. Let’s remember that doing noble things for God is not the same as spending life-giving time with Him. Thinking great thoughts about Him is not the same as vital communion with Him. Helping others understand the gospel is not the same as drinking presently and deeply from the wellspring of grace for ourselves.

Let’s refresh our communion with the Father, and renew our joy. Let’s get back on the dance floor of Father’s tender mercies, who fills and overflows our hearts with His loving-kindness. Who or what do we have in heaven but Jesus? Let’s desire nothing on earth above Him because absolutely nothing else satisfies our souls like He does.

Pray

My flesh and my heart may fail, but You, Jesus, are the strength of my heart and my portion, my inheritance forever. You are my Sovereign Lord and my loving Refuge. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

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This chapter kicks off with a strange thought, although that is not uncommon in Proverbs. Solomon mentions the weird occurrence of snow in summer or (the not so strange in Ireland) rain in harvest. It would have been most uncommon in the Middle East for either of these phenomena to take place. Coming at an unseasonal time, such weather would have been a disaster to the natural patterns of the earth and to the crops, both in growing and harvesting. (I found a funny verse in connection to this in 1 Samuel 12:17 that portrays thunder and rain at harvest time.) Solomon likens this seasonal disaster to giving honour to a fool. I find his comparisons somewhat amusing at times. He declares what he thinks should be done to the foolish person. He likens them to a donkey or a horse guided by bridles and whips.

Another subject that the writer seems to often land on is laziness. He gathers some interesting excuses that these people use. My favourite is in verse 13, *"There's a lion on the road, I'm sure there is a lion out there!"* There is an old saying, 'Any excuse does.' It's definitely true here. One would think he could have come up with a better one than this to stay at home and laze in his bed. We are told, like a swinging door a lazy man turns over in his bed. While the lazy man may lack drive and enthusiasm, he doesn't lack a high opinion of himself. He has an answer for everything and feels he is smarter than everyone. Usually you find the people who think they give the best advice are the people who never do anything. They seem to be overloaded with their own self-importance but that's as productive as it gets. There are loads of books written on how to raise the best kids by people who have never had any, and how to build a great business by people who have never built anything! Forgive me please, I'm honestly not being judgemental, I'm just agreeing with the wisest man to have ever lived!

Pray

Father, today I feel the need to do what You taught us through Timothy – pray for all people, asking You to help them, interceding on their behalf, and giving thanks for them. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

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Live

'Don't boast about tomorrow.' 'Let someone else do the praising when it comes to yourself.' Another great dose of wisdom in this chapter in the short snappy way that only Solomon can communicate. What wisdom is in verse 17. Iron can sharpen iron, and a good friend can sharpen a friend. A knife is not sharpened by cutting material, bread, wood or plastic. While it can cut and shape these things for them to be more useful, they actually blunt the knife. Sharpening a knife requires iron or at least something of similar substance and hardness as the knife. Once sharpened, a knife is much more aggressive and can cut with much less effort. This proverb is saying that good friends are invaluable, and they will make you better. Like a stone to a knife, a good friend will make you brighter, sharper, and more useful. The opposite is also true; a foolish friend can pull you astray and take you down a well-worn path of mayhem. Therefore, choose your friends wisely.

You need good friends, and you need to be a good friend. Many proverbs refer to problems in personal relationships. The essence of life is loving one another in our everyday relationships. Remember, people will know we are Christians by our love for each other (John 13:35). Friends are a major influence in our lives and the truth is we can be affected by our friends' opinions of us and of the world. Friends influence us. Maybe we don't actually think enough about how they influence us. I have no issue with friends who don't agree with me, those who challenge and stretch me to think beyond my comfort zones. As a matter of fact, I value those types of friend above all else – people who love me enough to not let me run amok. Jesus set an example to not isolate ourselves from people who are different from us. In fact, He told us in the Sermon on the Mount to be salt and light among all people. However, as you engage with all people, choose carefully your closest friends.

Pray

Father, I love this short prayer from Jeremiah that speaks so powerfully to me: *"Although our iniquities testify against us, O Lord, act for Your name's sake."* (Jeremiah 14:7). In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

Verse 1 has been one of my life verses. My kids have bought me several photos of lions over the years and one hangs in my living room with Proverbs 18:1 emblazoned upon it. *“The wicked run away when no one is chasing them...”* Just think about that. Their conscience, their paranoia, their own fickleness chasing them down the back alleys of life. When I read this short statement, it feels hollow and shallow, but when Solomon turns the flipside to this coin, it makes me sit up straight in my seat. No slouching, for, *“the righteous are as bold as a lion.”* I love this.

When man was first created, he knew no fear, but when sin entered the world he had to face all kinds of weakness and insecurities. The removal of guilt frees a person and gives them a confidence and boldness in their God. They become as bold as a lion. And so we find a correlation between verse 1 and verse 13: *“Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”* Sins are easily defined: breaking God's rules for living. There are sins of commission, doing what God commanded not to do; and sins of omission, not doing what He commanded to do. The two greatest commandments that Jesus told us to keep were based around love for God and love for our neighbour. He said if we kept these two, then all the others would hinge around them and fall into order.

So, the big question today is, are we as bold as lions, people who live in righteousness? Or are we running away like Adam and Eve, trying to hide, making our own feeble silly coverings and excuses? It is part of our human nature to hide and try to cover up our sins. The problem with that is someone will never learn from a mistake that they are unwilling to admit making. We need to admit it, confess it, and readjust so we don't make it again, and then we will learn much from the process.

Pray

Father, I want to live in You – abiding in the life-giving Vine that You are; reflecting on Your glory with an unveiled face; forgiving others as You have forgiven me; forbearing with others as You forbear with me; accepting others as You have accepted me. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

A few big questions to open with from verse 1. Are you a rebellious, stubborn person who refuses criticism? Do you ignore any correction or instruction? Has God convicted you often about something that you still have not changed? Have people with authority, or teachers in your life, reminded you about a matter that you refuse to correct? I am so thankful for a God Who comes after us with relentlessness, tenacity, and fervour that is unparalleled. He is unwavering in His commitment to rescue our hearts from illusions, mirages, broken cisterns, idols, and wannabe lovers. I wish He didn't have to be, but I am grateful He is so committed to keeping me from self-destructing. While God is longsuffering and full of mercy and grace, we need to remember that He will not always turn a blind eye. The Authorised Bible says that one who is often reproved and does not take heed shall suddenly be destroyed, like a potter's vessel that is broken to pieces and can never be put together again. Solomon says this person's fate is sealed and it will come on them suddenly. Strong language. It would seem that they have deferred their retribution once too often and now they've tipped off the ledge.

As in many of the proverbs, opposites are shown, and verse 2 shows us the benefit of Godly leaders as opposed to wickedness in positions of power. As we close the chapter today, we see that good people and evil people have nothing in common. Solomon is warning us not to surmise that evil people will support what you do. If you do the right things, you can expect to be shunned by some. What I find interesting about this verse is what Solomon says on the other side of the coin. The righteous ought to despise the ways of the evil as well. Have nothing to do with them, Solomon warns. Instead, warn the evil person, tell them of the error of their ways and what their bitter end will be if they continue on such a path.

Pray

Father, today would You call out in me any rebelliousness to Your love and mercy. Help me to respond first to You and to others who love me enough to shout foul in my life when needed. Thank You for Your endless pursuit of me. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

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Today we are introduced briefly to two people, Agur and his dad, Jakeh. Say hello quickly because this is the only time you will meet them in Scripture. We can chat to them in God's great eternity, but for today, we will get just a little insight into their wisdom. Nothing is known about Agur beyond what is written in this chapter. He is unknown to the rest of the Bible and to history, but because God gave him perfect wisdom, these lessons are recorded for you in the Bible. I love how God pulls these beforehand unknowns out of the woodwork and gives them a place in the Holy Scriptures for us to learn from. Don't ever underestimate who God can and will use, as everyone has a call. Our duty is to find out what that is. These simple yet profound observations on life reveal many aspects of this man named Agur who realised God's wisdom was greater than his own. He knew that riches and their lure and temptation needed to be watched. He knew that many aspects of life and of God's creation would remain a mystery beyond his understanding. He knew the importance of controlling anger, avoiding foolishness, and living for God. He encourages his readers to refrain from a life that dishonours God.

This chapter fuels my gratitude, especially for the women and men God has used over the years to bring me into a greater understanding of Himself – a myriad of friends and mentors who have helped me understand the rich theology and wisdom found in the Word of God. As a young believer, reading and writing weren't my strongest skills, but I pursued my belief in the fact I could better myself. I thank God for patient teachers who sat and opened the Scriptures and showed me the real Jesus: the Messiah Who lived and died in my place; the second Adam, my perfect righteousness, not merely my moral model. I thank God for friends who helped me experience Him, His life-giving liberty, His healing power, and His never-ending joy.

Pray

Father, with the passing of years, I now know You to be the God who greatly delights in Your people, Who quiets me with Your love, and Who rejoices over me with singing. You are the Father of mercies and God of all comfort. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

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What an incredible book. We've reached the last chapter today, but I hope it has caught you and that you will re-read it often. My dad was a quiet man. He was a Godly man who lived out his faith very silently. I remember him saying, "A proverb a day keeps the devil away." It seemed his little practice was to read one of the thirty-one chapters on the corresponding day of the month. Leafing through his Bible after he died, I found Proverbs and Psalms were totally worn out. Many pages bore the stains of what I'm sure were tears.

As we close today, a word to the mums (I was blessed with a great one). Some theologians believe Lemuel was the pet name for Solomon, so the mother would have been Bathsheba. She gives him three hefty pieces of advice that anyone would be wise to follow. Firstly, she speaks to him concerning morality. Secondly, she warns him of the destructive nature of alcohol. And thirdly, she speaks to him concerning his love for the poor and the need to speak up for those who don't have a voice. Some other great mums in Scripture were Hannah, who prepared Samuel well for his religious life at Shiloh; Lois and Eunice, grandmother and mother of Timothy, who communicated their sincere faith and taught him the Scriptures from childhood. We do not know details of Mary's relationship to Jesus, but we know He was in subjection to her, and she pondered His words in her heart. We know she taught Him good doctrine, and He honoured her at the end of His life. As Solomon closes this book today, he reminds us of the value of our amazing ladies. Can I say a personal 'thank you' to all the women of influence in my life; many have already gone home to heaven, and, thankfully, many are still on planet earth. Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 3 that women have the power of influence without even using words. In our home we call it "the look". Can I challenge you wonderful ladies, use your influence wisely and above all in a way that honours God. Much love to you all.

Pray

Father, thank You today for the wisdom of this incredible book that we have just read through in the last month. What in-depth beauty and grace, all lined with stupendous wisdom. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

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