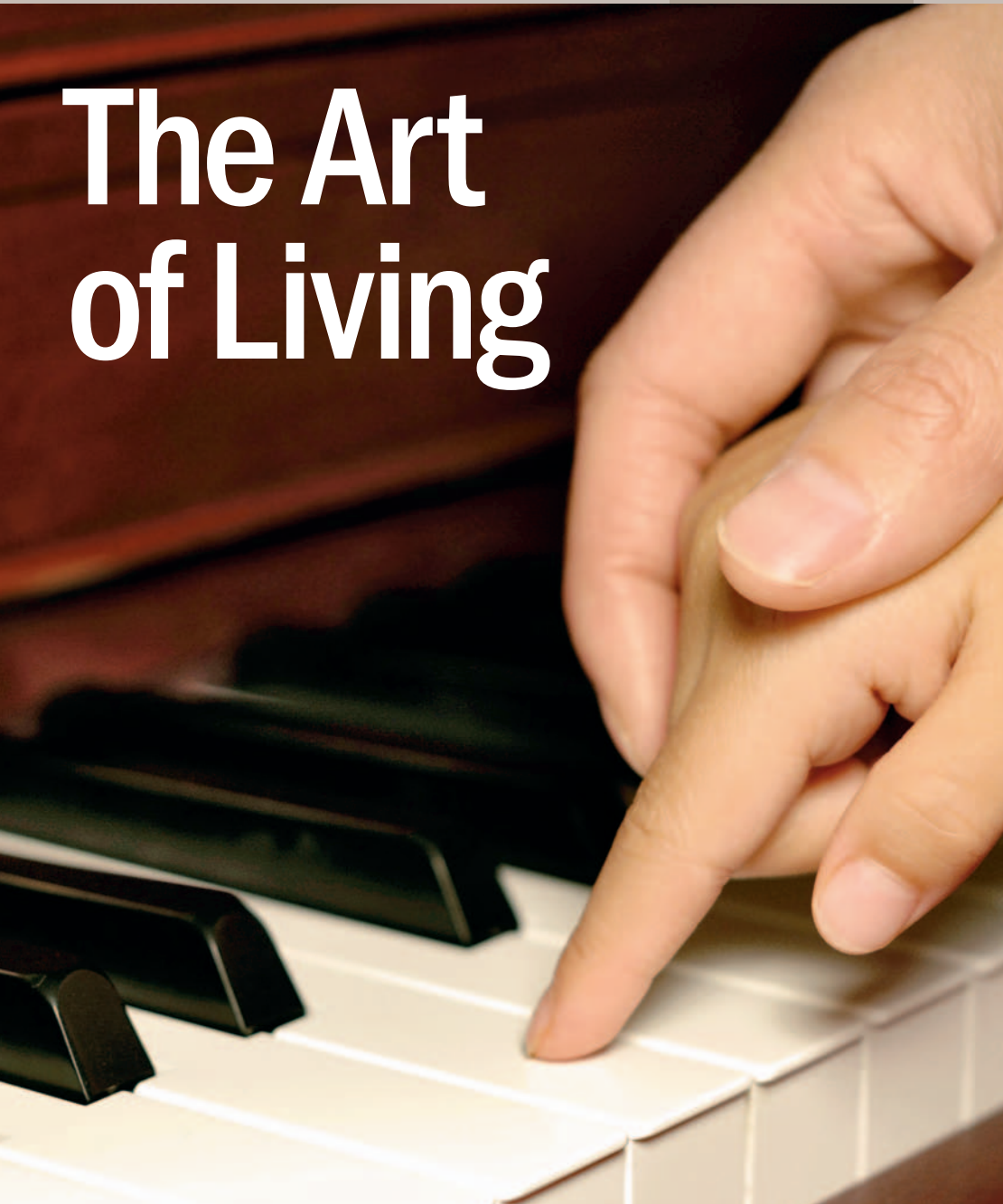




PATHWAY BIBLE GUIDES

PROVERBS

The Art of Living





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PROVERBS

BY BRYSON SMITH



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The Art of Living

Pathway Bible Guides: Proverbs

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

“How should I live my life?” This is a pertinent question not just for Christians but for non-Christians too, judging by the shelves and shelves of self-help books you see in your local bookstore, and the letters pages of certain magazines. There are people wanting advice about all sorts of things, like “Which job should I take?”, “What should I say to my friend whose mother died recently?”, “What’s the best thing to do in this situation?”, and so on. The answers come not just from self-help books and magazine columns, but from a variety of sources: your family, your friends, your colleagues, your minister and other people you respect. Some of it is common knowledge; some of it is folk wisdom. As the old sayings go, “Too many cooks spoil the broth”, “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” and “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch”.

However, when it comes to the art of living, the book of Proverbs is really the best authority on how to live, because its wisdom is no less than the wisdom of God—the God who created it all and knows it all. Indeed, the most important lesson on wisdom that Proverbs has to teach can be found in the very first chapter: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov 1:7).

Proverbs is filled with rich instruction on how to live—how to spend our money, how to work, what to say (and how to say it) and a whole host of other topics. Because of who God is, certain types of behaviour are good

and certain types of behaviour are bad. Because of the way he established the world, we can observe certain patterns about the way it works, reflect on them and then act accordingly. Proverbs offers instruction that will enable us to live stable, good, coherent and effective lives.

But Proverbs also acknowledges that there will always be a voice—the voice of folly—competing for our attention and seeking to lead us astray. The voice of folly comes in many disguises—some of which may not be immediately obvious to us. We must learn to recognize it and reject it for what it is, for the result of heeding it is always death and destruction.

That the message of Proverbs is an unpopular one in our society should be no surprise, for its message ultimately concerns the Lord Jesus Christ. In fearing the Lord, we are not just to fear any old god but the one “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3). Jesus, as God’s king, has been endowed with all wisdom and understanding, which makes him the pre-eminent authority on wisdom—the only truly wise man. In fearing him, we come to understand the real purpose of life, and therefore the real goal of wisdom.

In these studies, we’ll examine what the book of Proverbs means by ‘wisdom’ and how that wisdom applies to our lives. It is my prayer that as you discover wisdom’s immeasurable value, you’ll hold it near and dear, and let it shape your life. To possess wisdom is to understand the true art of living.

Bryson Smith

October 2007

1. THE GAINING OF WISDOM

Proverbs 1:1-6



Getting started

What are some examples of good advice you have received from others?
What made their advice so helpful?



Light from the Word

Read Proverbs 1:1-6.

1. According to verses 2-5, what is the purpose of the book of Proverbs?

2. Verses 2-5 mention lots of things. What do you think is meant by the following?
 - wisdom

 - prudence

 - discretion

3. Do you think the things mentioned in verses 2-5 are popular or unpopular in today's world? Why?

4. Which of the things listed in question 2 would you like to have more of? Why?

5. Verse 6 alerts us to the fact that the book of Proverbs is going to contain a range of different types of expressions of wisdom (e.g. proverbs, sayings and riddles). How would you define each one?
- proverb
 - saying (this is translated as ‘parable’ in the NIV)
 - riddle
6. Who wrote this book, according to verse 1?

Read I Kings 4:29-34.

7. Why is Solomon a good person to learn about life from?

The connection between Solomon and wisdom is the start of an ongoing association in the Old Testament between wisdom and God’s king. Read Isaiah 11:1-3.

8. These verses describe God's future king (i.e. Messiah or Christ)—the one who will rule Israel. What characteristics of this future king are similar to those in Proverbs 1:2-5?

The connection between wisdom and God's king reaches its most profound moment with the coming of Jesus Christ. Read Matthew 12:38-42.

9. If Jesus is even wiser than Solomon, how should we respond to what Jesus says?



To finish

Are there certain things about following Jesus which don't make sense to the world, and which seem a bit silly to do? How does this study strengthen our trust in what Jesus says?



Give thanks and pray

Thank God for the wonderful wisdom of our Lord Jesus. Ask him to give you the wisdom to be obedient to him.

FOR THE LEADER

What are Pathway Bible Guides?

The Pathway Bible Guides aim to provide simple, straightforward Bible study material for:

- Christians who are new to studying the Bible (perhaps because they've been recently converted or because they have joined a Bible study group for the first time)
- Christians who find other studies¹ too much of a stretch.

Accordingly, we've designed the studies to be short, straightforward and easy to use, with a simple vocabulary. At the same time, we've tried to do justice to the passages being studied, and to model good Bible-reading principles. We've tried to be simple without being simplistic; no-nonsense without being no-content.

The questions and answers assume a small group context, but it should be easy to adapt them to suit different situations, such as individual study and one-to-one.

Your role as leader

Because many in your group may not be used to reading and discussing a Bible passage in a group context, a greater level of responsibility will fall to you as the leader of the discussions. There are the usual responsibilities of preparation, prayer and managing group dynamics. Then, in addition, there will be an extra dimension of forming and encouraging good Bible reading habits in people who may not have much of an idea of what those habits look like.

Questions have been kept deliberately brief and simple. For that reason, you may have to fill in some of the gaps that may have been addressed in, say, an Interactive Bible Study. Such 'filling in' may take the form of asking follow-up

1. Such as the Interactive Bible Study (IBS) series also available from Matthias Media.

questions, or using your best judgement to work out when you might need to supply background information. That sort of information, and some suggestions about other questions you could ask, may be found in the following leader's notes. In addition, a *New Bible Dictionary* is always a useful aid to preparation, and simple commentaries such as those in the *Tyndale* or *Bible Speaks Today* series are often helpful. Consult them after you have done your own preparation.

On the question of background information, these studies are written from the assumption that God's word stands alone. God works through his Holy Spirit and the leaders he has gifted—such as you—to make his meaning clear. Assuming this to be true, the best interpreter and provider of background information for Scripture will not be academic historical research, but Scripture itself. Extra historical information may be useful for the purpose of illustration, but it is unnecessary for understanding and applying what God says to us.

The format of the studies

The discussion questions on each passage follow a simple pattern. There is a question at the beginning of each discussion that is intended to get people talking around the issues raised by the passage, and to give you some idea of how people are thinking. If the group turns out to be confident, motivated and comfortable with each other and the task at hand, you may even decide to skip this question. Alternatively, if the group members are shy or quiet, you may decide to think of related types of questions that you could add in to the study, so as to maintain momentum in a non-threatening way.

After the first question, the remaining questions work through the passage sequentially, alternating between observation, interpretation and application in a way that will become obvious when you do your own preparation. The final question of each discussion, just before the opportunity for prayer, could be used in some groups to encourage (say) one person each week to give a short talk (it could be 1 minute or 5 minutes, depending on the topic, and the people). The thinking here is that there's no better way to encourage understanding of a passage than to get people to the point where they can explain it to others. Use your judgement in making best use of this final exercise each week, depending on the people in your group.

In an average group, it should be possible to work through the study in approximately 45 minutes. But it's important that you work out what your group is capable of given the time available, and make adjustments accordingly. Work

out in advance which questions or sub-points can be omitted if time is short. And have a few supplementary questions or discussion starters up your sleeve if your group is dealing with the material quite quickly and hungering for more. Each group is different. It's your job as leader to use the printed material as 'Bible Guides', and not as a set of questions that you must rigidly stick to regardless of your circumstances.

Preparation: 60/40/20

Ideally, group members should spend half an hour reading over the passage and penciling in some answers *before* they come to the group. Not every group member will do this, of course, but encourage them with the idea that the more they prepare for the study, the more they will get out of the discussion.

In terms of your own preparation as leader, we recommend you put aside approximately *two hours*, either all at once or in two one-hour blocks, and that you divide up the time as follows:

- 60 minutes reading the passage and answering the questions yourself as best you can (without looking at the leader's notes or Bible commentaries).
- 40 minutes consulting the leader's notes (plus other resources, like commentaries). Add to your own answers, and jot down supplementary questions or other information that you want to have available as you lead the discussion. Make sure you write everything you need on the study pages—the last thing you want to do is to keep turning to the 'answers' in the back during the group discussion.
- 20 minutes praying about the study and for your group members.

This 60/40/20 pattern will help you to focus on the Bible, and what it's saying, rather than simply regurgitating to the group what is in the leader's notes. Remember these notes are just that—notes to offer some help and guidance. They are not the Bible! As a pattern of preparation, the 60/40/20 also helps you to keep praying for yourself and your group, that God would give spiritual growth as his word is sown in your hearts (see Luke 8:4-15; I Cor 3:5-7).

If, for some reason, you have less or more time to spend in preparation, simply apply the 60/40/20 proportions accordingly.

LEADER'S NOTES

1. THE GAINING OF WISDOM

Proverbs 1:1-6

► Remember 60/40/20



Getting started

Stroll into any bookstore and you'll discover shelves full of self-help books—books with titles like *Secrets for Success and Happiness*, *The 10 Natural Laws of Successful Time and Life Management*, *More Than 60 Ways to Make Your Life Amazing* and *Your Best Year Yet*. Clearly many of us want help in negotiating life. We have lingering doubts we're not the best we can be. The 'Getting started' question taps into this search for self-improvement by gathering examples of the types of advice which have helped us improve our lives. This provides a good link into the book of Proverbs for, as we shall see in this study, the self-proclaimed aim of Proverbs is to help us live well.

Studying the passage

Proverbs is one of those very handy parts of the Bible which begins by telling us why it was written. Its purpose is described in verses 2-4:

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 ...

This purpose statement contains three noteworthy words: 'wisdom', 'prudence' and 'discretion'. Each word provides a helpful insight into the value and purpose of the book (question 2). In the Bible, 'wisdom' is practical knowledge. Wisdom

is more than knowing facts; wisdom is making the right use of facts. Wisdom is knowing what to do next in life. The word ‘prudence’ carries with it the idea of exercising care and good judgement in planning for the future. Prudence is being able to make *present* decisions so as to best achieve *future* goals. The word ‘discretion’ brings with it overtones of self-restraint and sensitivity: the discreet person makes right decisions in such a way as to not cause offence or hurt to others.

Proverbs, therefore, offers its readers rich instruction in the art of living— instruction that enables us to live stable, good, coherent and effective lives. For this reason, Proverbs is an incredibly useful book for our restless, modern society where so many of us struggle to know how to get the best out of life. Ironically, though, Proverb’s emphasis on prudence, discipline and self-restraint is not a message many want to hear nowadays (question 3).

As well as describing the purpose of the book, the opening verses also inform us of the pattern of the book. In particular we discover that the book contains a range of sayings (v. 6; question 5). This range will include proverbs (the one-sentence life insights for which the book is most famous), sayings (described as ‘parables’ in the NIV—stories or sayings, often with a biting or satirical edge to them, from which a life lesson can be drawn) and riddles (sayings from which a lesson is not immediately obvious). Proverbs is therefore a book which will require thoughtful reading. It is not simply a list of universal rules which will guarantee us successful lives. As we will discover, the book is more subtle and multilayered than that (see study 5 if you can’t wait).

As well as explaining the purpose and pattern of the book, the opening verses also introduce us to a very significant person associated with the book. According to verse 1, this is a book closely connected with King Solomon, the king of Israel and son of King David (question 6). This is not surprising since, within the Old Testament, Solomon appears as a great patron and sponsor of wisdom. 1 Kings 4:29 informs us that “God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore”. Solomon spoke 3,000 proverbs, described plant life, and taught about animals, birds, reptiles and fish (1 Kgs 4:32-33). Solomon was therefore an excellent instructor in the art of living (question 7).

What is perhaps most significant is that the mention of Solomon in verse 1 further strengthens the tight association between wisdom and God’s king in the Bible. Tragically, this association was soon tainted by a long line of foolish and immoral kings who came after Solomon. However, the Old Testament never completely

loses this connection between God's king and wisdom; instead, it holds it out as an ideal. This is most clearly seen in the prophets, where God's coming Christ is linked with wisdom and understanding (question 8)—for example, in Isaiah 11:2:

And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

Given this link between wisdom and God's king, it is therefore, no surprise that when Jesus Christ appears the New Testament, writers portray him as the bearer of great wisdom:

The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. (Matt 12:42)

These links between wisdom, God's king and Jesus Christ carry enormous implications for how we are to live our lives. They help us see that obeying Jesus will lead to us getting the most out of life. If Solomon's wisdom and understanding were "beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore", how much more is Jesus' wisdom and understanding! Insight and discernment can be found in his every word.

As children of God saved by Christ's death and resurrection it is therefore our privilege and blessing to do what Jesus says, for his wisdom is beyond question. Jesus Christ knows better than anyone else how we can be the best people we can be. So, irrespective, of what our friends or family or even our own desires might urge us to do, we must always say "Yes!" to Jesus Christ, for someone even greater than Solomon has come (question 9).

To finish

The finishing question is designed to help us reflect on the confidence we have in Jesus as the giver of true wisdom. It's important to linger on this truth because, to the ears of the world, much of what Jesus says sounds foolish. Jesus' teachings on self-restraint, servanthood and the priorities of the kingdom are stunningly counter-cultural. The opening verses of Proverbs are therefore of great benefit in helping us appreciate God's Christ as the wisest man of all. In his words we can have full confidence.



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It was in 1988 that we first started pursuing this mission together, and in God's kindness we now have more than 250 different ministry resources being distributed all over the world. These resources range from Bible studies and books, through to training courses and audio sermons.

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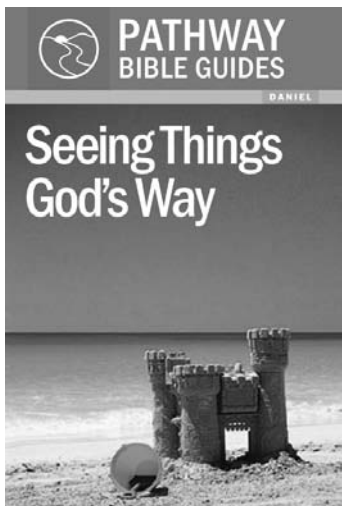
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Seeing Things God's Way

by Bryson Smith



Like Daniel and his friends, captive in Babylon, Christians live as strangers and exiles in this world. We are different. We stand out because we trust in God's wisdom, not the wisdom of this world; we trust in God's forgiveness, in the face of our own evil and the evil of this world; and we trust in God's eternal kingdom rather than the passing rulers and authorities who dominate worldly politics.

In the book of Daniel, we find rich teaching and encouragement to keep seeing things God's way in a world that is determined to go its own way.

8 studies. Leader's notes included.

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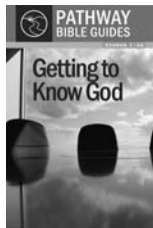
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From Sinner to Saint

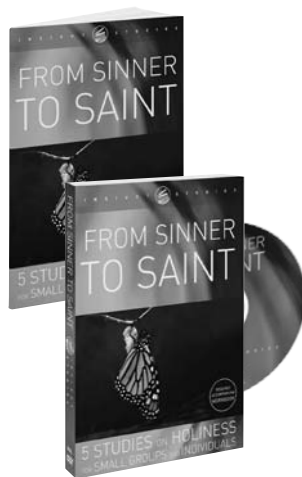
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