

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Get smart

Presented by Michael Jensen

I

What is the secret of life? What is the secret of living the prosperous, healthy and fulfilled life? What is the key to maximizing your potential as a human being? When life is so complicated that it feels like an overgrown jungle, how can you cut a clear path through?

Answering this question is big business. The self-help section of any book store is overflowing with books about how to live: *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, *I'm OK You're OK*, *Unleash the Power Within*, *Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love*, *Time Management for Dummies*, *The Liver-Cleansing Diet*, *Life's Little Instruction Book*, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, *Passionate Marriage*, *The Art of Happiness*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *Rich Dad/Poor Dad*, *The Tao of Leadership* and many many more. There is an unbelievable amount of stuff written on how to master your personal finances and become wealthy, how to find a partner, how to have great relationships, how to have great sex, how to be a parent, how to have a great relationship and great sex after you become a parent, how to handle your divorce, and how to manage your finances after your divorce.

You can make a million bucks setting up seminars on these topics.

II

Why are life decisions so difficult? Why do we find it so hard to master ourselves such that we can be what we want to be? Why are so many of us unhappy with who we are?

The book of Proverbs is a book of wisdom for living life, and suggests an answer to these questions. Proverbs contains a lot of the kind of ideas on the same topics you might find in the self-help section of the bookshop. It has practical advice about choosing a partner, relationships, friendship, controlling your speech, investment and money, and many other topics.

But the key difference of the book of Proverbs is the way it explains what wisdom is, and where it comes from. This is what I want to focus on today, before moving on in the next few weeks to look at some particular topics that Proverbs covers.

Let's turn to the opening verses of the book. Notice the heading verse, verse 1: "The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel." This collection of proverbs has always been associated with King Solomon, who reigned when Israel was at its peak. Solomon was famous for his wisdom: when God had visited him in a dream and offered to do whatever he asked, Solomon had asked for the gift of wisdom and discernment. In 1 Kings 5:29-34 we hear how God granted this request.

It's not thought that Solomon wrote all the proverbs: but that he was a great collector and promoter of wisdom. And this is what the purpose of the collection is:

for attaining wisdom and discipline, for understanding words of insight, for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young – let the wise listen and add to their learning and let the discerning get guidance – for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.

This book is about how to make good decisions in life – how to be disciplined and smart, how to know what is right and good, how to get by in a complicated world. Sounds promising, doesn't it? But here's the key to the whole thing, in vs 7:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

This acts as a kind of theme statement for the book, and comes up again in 9:10 as "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." In fact, this formula or something very close to it appears in five places in all in the Bible, in Psalm 111:10, Job 28:28 and Proverbs 15:33 as well. It must be a pretty important idea. So what does it mean?

III

Do you fear God? We modern people don't like much the idea that our God is to be *feared*. We like to imagine a safe God, a God who loves us and protects us, a God who is gentle and kind. We think of our reaction to those qualities of God and "fear" is not it. We do not think of "fear" as a pleasant emotion I guess.

But "the fear of the Lord" is a key way that the writers of the Old Testament – and especially of Proverbs – talk about our right response to the true God.

Why is God to be feared?

God is to be feared because of the wonder of what he can do. If you go and consider the sheer vastness of space, with its millions of suns and untold planets spinning in undescribed orbits; or the mass of microbes milling around, so minuscule we cannot see them; or the unimaginable diversity of animal life; or the vaults of rock that through wind and rain and sun have become the blue mountains; or the way in which one of our own babies is born: is not the creator of these to be regarded with an awe we might rightly call fear?

And for Israel, who had seen the mighty acts of God in saving them from slavery in Egypt – it was all the more an imperative. This was the God who has shown his character in the bringing them out of Egypt. He is the one who has shown his faithfulness to his promises; he is the one who defeated the best army on the planet.

One of the strangest news stories I have heard was about the guy in New York who was discovered to be keeping a tiger and an alligator in his apartment. How he managed to get them there, I don't know. It was all discovered when the tiger bit him quite badly. What the guy was thinking, trying to keep a tiger like a domestic cat, I don't know – but I believe he spent a lot on kitty litter. His neighbours had heard strange *roaring* sounds, but hadn't thought anything of it. And I hope he learnt a lesson: you can't keep a tiger as a domestic pet. If you don't show proper respect for the tiger, you are extremely foolish.

Tyger, tyger

God is not a tiger, or course, nor any kind of animal. But like the tiger he needs to be given his right regard. You can't keep him at home like a domestic pet that sleeps on your bed and eats out of your hand. You can't *tame* the Lord and control him, or shrink him down to a convenient and more manageable size.

IV

It is fascinating then that this faith, "the fear of the Lord", is the beginning of wisdom. Faith precedes knowledge – in fact it makes true knowledge possible. It is like a light that shines on the world and makes understanding it real. You need to submit to God to see how all knowledge makes sense.

The philosophers who composed the proverbs knew what God is like. They had reflected on what he had done. They now began to search beyond the specific things he had said in the law, and to search for knowledge and understanding in the light of revelation.

Right regard for God was the proper starting point for wisdom – "the beginning." To get wise, you need to begin with this perspective. Mind you, notice that it isn't the totality of wisdom. It is the beginning, the springboard from which we are to jump, the platform on which we are to build. And this tells us something important – wisdom is not dictated to us. It is there for us to find – in fact it is our responsibility, as God-fearers, to seek it out.

But the fear of the Lord is also wisdom's goal. It is where wisdom will take us in the end. Have a look at Proverbs 2:1-5: Knowledge will return us to its own foundation; and deepen our regard for the Lord.

But this is going to take a bit of work on our part: to think hard and consider how what we know about God and the gospel of his Son Jesus Christ relates to our experience world in which we live. God hasn't given us a specific message for whether the war on Iraq was right or wrong, or told us who exactly to marry, or whether to die your hair, or what job to take, or whether go overseas or not. We need to think about our Lord; and out of true fear of him work out our attitudes to science, human behaviour and psychology, ethics, the environment, social relationships and politics. And some of the answers might be found in the secular world, as we relate that knowledge back to God. For example, the book of Proverbs contains some passages from the wisdom of the Egyptians. What Proverbs does is acknowledges that all true knowledge comes from the God who is creator and should be related back to him.

V

There is a tremendous freedom in wisdom; but also a risk. Whether we like it or not, wisdom tells us that there is a sense of risk to life. We are not given a map of the future, or an answer to every question we have. But the fear of the Lord tells us that the risk of freedom in this sinful world is not fatal for the child of God. God does not ask us to go out into the world and risk losing our way entirely. But he does not allow us to shirk our responsibility of being human. We are given brains and intuitions in order to interpret the world in the light of the gospel.

But one important point to finish. The basic difference between the wisdom of the Bible and the wisdom of the self-help books is that, for the Bible, the source of wisdom is not inside us, in our instincts or our self-actualizations. It is in God. It needs to begin with our awe of him. Instead of practicing self-analysis all the time, let us practice God-analysis. Let us study him, rather than ourselves.