THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

The King Who Gives Wisdom

Proverbs, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Gives Wisdom: The Book of Proverbs, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

Copyright © 2026 Bill McLeod. All rights reserved.

Published by Papa Bill Books.

Scripture quotations are from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, which is in the public domain.

All Scripture quotations in this book are from the WEB. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” Proverbs might be the most teen-focused book in the Bible. Much of it was written as advice from a parent to a young person about to step out into the world. Over and over it says, my son, listen. It’s about friends, words, money, work, anger, dating, temptation, and who you’re becoming.

Proverbs doesn’t read like a story. It reads more like a collection of sayings, short, punchy, memorable lines, the ancient version of the quotes people post online, except these have lasted three thousand years. Some are funny. Some are blunt. Some will make you think for days.

So why read it? Because you’re making decisions right now that will shape the rest of your life. Proverbs is a crash course in wisdom, the skill of living well in God’s world. And unlike a lot of advice you’ll get, it comes from the One who designed life in the first place.

Let’s go.

How This Book Works

Proverbs has 31 chapters, and most of chapters 10 through 29 are individual sayings that jump from topic to topic. So instead of going chapter by chapter, this book is organized by theme in seven chapters: the fear of the LORD and trust, Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly, words and reputation, friends, drama, and anger, work,

money, and integrity, heart, boundaries, and family, and finally the words of Agur and King Lemuel's mother.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains who wrote Proverbs, how it's organized, and one crucial thing about how to read it: proverbs are principles, not promises. Read that part first. It will save you a lot of confusion.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as how to understand the verses about the rod of discipline, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Proverbs often, but explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the twentieth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Proverbs was written, in large part, as instruction from parents to young people, so it's a natural fit for this age. This book is organized by theme rather than chapter. It opens with a crucial framing: proverbs are general principles about how life usually works, not guaranteed promises. They're meant to be read alongside Job and Ecclesiastes, which honestly address the exceptions. This helps readers avoid both disillusionment and the false guilt that can come from reading verses like 22:6 as ironclad guarantees.

Real Talk boxes apply Proverbs to friendships, peer pressure, gossip, texting and social media, anger, work, money, generosity, purity, and family life. A fair hard-passage box addresses the verses about the rod of discipline, presenting how Christians have understood them while clearly distinguishing loving, biblical discipline from abuse. A safety box points any reader who is being hurt at home to a trusted adult, Childhelp, 911, and 988.

The final chapter presents the Proverbs 31 woman as a celebration of strength, competence, and character rather than a checklist to measure up to. The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament presents Jesus as the wisdom of God and one greater than Solomon, while acknowledging that Jewish readers treasure Proverbs in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will begin with the fear of the LORD, and grow into a wise, kind, honest, and courageous person.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What Kind of Book Is This?

Proverbs is wisdom literature, like Job and Ecclesiastes. In the Bible, wisdom isn't just being smart. It's the skill of living well: knowing how to make good choices, treat people rightly, handle money, control your temper, and honor God in everyday life. The Hebrew word for wisdom was even used for the skill of craftsmen and artists. Wisdom is the art of living.

Who Wrote It?

The book opens with the words, the proverbs of Solomon, the son of David, king of Israel. First Kings says Solomon spoke three thousand proverbs, and people came from all over the world to hear his wisdom. But Proverbs is a collection, and it names other contributors too: a group called the wise, the men of King Hezekiah who copied out more of Solomon's proverbs about two hundred years later, a man named Agur, and King Lemuel, who passes on what his mother taught him. Some sayings in chapters 22 through 24 closely resemble an Egyptian wisdom text called the Instruction of Amenemope, which suggests Israel's sages knew and learned from the wisdom of neighboring cultures, while placing everything under the fear of the LORD.

How It's Organized

Chapters 1 through 9 are longer speeches, mostly a parent speaking to a son, along with poems in which Wisdom and Folly are pictured

as two women calling out to young people. Chapters 10 through 29 are mostly short, two-line sayings, often arranged with little obvious order. Chapters 30 and 31 contain the words of Agur and of King Lemuel's mother, ending with the famous poem about a woman of strength. Many proverbs use parallelism, like the Psalms: the second line repeats, contrasts, or completes the first.

Principles, Not Promises

This is the most important thing to understand about Proverbs. A proverb is a short saying about how life generally works. It isn't a guarantee. Think of the saying, the early bird gets the worm. It's usually true, but not always. Proverbs works the same way. When it says hard work leads to wealth, or that training up a child in the right way means they won't depart from it (22:6), it's describing a reliable pattern in God's world, not a vending machine where you put in good behavior and always get the promised result. Sometimes diligent people stay poor. Sometimes children raised by faithful parents walk away from God, and it isn't the parents' fault. That's why God also gave us Job, about a righteous man who suffered, and Ecclesiastes, which admits that the race is not always to the swift. Read Proverbs as wise principles, read Job and Ecclesiastes as honest reminders of the exceptions, and trust God with what you don't understand. Proverbs even contains sayings that seem to contradict each other, like 26:4 and 26:5, as if to say: wisdom isn't about applying rules mechanically. It's about knowing which principle fits the moment.

Who Is It For?

Proverbs says it was written to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young. The word simple in

Proverbs doesn't mean unintelligent. It means inexperienced, open, and easily influenced, someone who hasn't yet decided which way to go. That describes most teenagers, and honestly, a lot of adults too. Proverbs also says the wise will listen and grow wiser still. No one outgrows it.

How to Read a Proverb

Proverbs are short on purpose. They're designed to be memorable, like a good quote or a catchy line from a song. But short sayings can be easy to misread. A few tips help. First, read slowly and notice the two halves of each line. Often the second half contrasts with the first, and the contrast is the point. Second, ask what kind of person the proverb is describing: the wise, the fool, the simple, the sluggard, the scoffer, or the righteous. Third, think of a real situation where the proverb would apply, and one where it might not. Fourth, read it alongside the rest of the Bible. And fifth, try living it for a week. Proverbs was written to be practiced, not just studied.

The Map

Chapter 1: The fear of the LORD and trust.

Chapter 2: Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly.

Chapter 3: Words and reputation.

Chapter 4: Friends, drama, and anger.

Chapter 5: Work, money, and integrity.

Chapter 6: Heart, boundaries, and family.

Chapter 7: Agur and King Lemuel's mother.

Contents

Setting the Scene .....

1 Where Wisdom Begins *1:1–7; 2; 3:1–12* .....

2 Two Voices Calling *1–9* .....

3 Words and Reputation *10–26 (selected)* .....

4 Friends, Drama, and Anger *12–29 (selected)* .....

5 Work, Money, and Integrity *6; 10–30 (selected)* .....

6 Heart, Boundaries, and Family *4; 13–31 (selected)* .....

7 Agur and Lemuel's Mother *30–31* .....

Where This Points .....

CHAPTER 1

Where Wisdom Begins

Proverbs 1:1–7; 2; 3:1–12

Proverbs opens like a mission statement. It tells you exactly why it was written: "to know wisdom and instruction; to discern the words of understanding; to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young man."

In other words, this book was written for you. Then, before the first lesson, comes the foundation for everything else. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but the foolish despise wisdom and instruction."

That single verse is the thesis of the whole book. It appears, in slightly different forms, again and again in Proverbs, at the beginning, the middle, and the end. If you remember nothing else from Proverbs, remember this: wisdom starts with God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What Does Fear Mean?**
>
> When Proverbs talks about the fear of the LORD, it doesn't mean being terrified of God, like being scared of a monster under your bed or a bully at school. The Hebrew word can mean fear, but it also means awe, deep respect, and reverence. Think about how you'd feel standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon, or watching a massive thunderstorm roll in, or meeting someone you deeply admire. You'd feel small, amazed, and respectful all at once. That's closer to what the fear of the LORD means. It's taking God seriously:

recognizing that He is God and you are not, that He is holy and good, and that His opinion matters more than anyone else's. Proverbs also says the fear of the LORD is to hate evil, so it's tied to how you live. And it's not a cold or distant fear. People who fear God in this way also trust Him, love Him, and feel safe with Him.

Why is the fear of the LORD the beginning of knowledge? Because if you get God wrong, you'll get everything else wrong too. If you think you're the center of the universe, every decision will revolve around you. If you think there's no God, you'll have no ultimate reason for right and wrong. But if you start with God, as Creator, King, and Father, then everything else starts to make sense. You can see the world as it really is.

The verse also introduces a character who will show up throughout Proverbs: the fool. In Proverbs, a fool isn't someone with a low IQ. Lots of very smart people are fools in the Proverbs sense. A fool is someone who refuses to listen, who thinks he already knows it all, and who despises correction. That might sound familiar. Remember the saying at the front of this book: hire a teenager while they still know it all. Proverbs is basically one long invitation to stop being a know-it-all and start being wise.

REAL TALK **Know-It-All Syndrome**

It's normal, when you're a teenager, to feel like adults don't understand you, and sometimes they don't. It's also normal to start questioning what you've been taught. That's part of growing up, and it can be healthy. But there's a difference between asking questions and refusing to listen to anyone. Proverbs says the fool is right in his own eyes, but the wise person listens to advice. The smartest people you know are probably the ones who are most willing to learn from others. You don't have to agree with everything adults say. But being willing to listen is the first step toward wisdom.

Then the first speech in Proverbs begins with a parent speaking to a child. "My son, listen to your father's instruction, and don't forsake your mother's teaching." Notice that both parents are teachers here. In ancient Israel, mothers had a crucial role in passing on wisdom, and Proverbs ends with a mother's wisdom too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why My Son?**

Proverbs often addresses "my son," because it was written in a culture where fathers usually trained sons for public life. But its wisdom is for everyone. Wisdom herself is pictured as a woman, the last chapter is a mother's teaching, and the book closes by celebrating a wise woman. When you read my son, you can hear my child. These words are for daughters just as much as for sons.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Four Kinds of People**

Proverbs describes several kinds of people, and it helps to know them. The simple are inexperienced and easily influenced, still deciding which way to go. The fool has decided against wisdom and refuses correction. The scoffer, or mocker, goes further and openly ridicules what's good. And the wise person fears the LORD, listens, and keeps learning. Proverbs is mostly written to the simple, hoping to win them over to wisdom before they settle into foolishness. If you feel like you're still figuring things out, that's exactly who this book is for.

Chapter 2 tells you how to find wisdom. It's not passive. You have to go looking for it. "My son, if you will receive my words, and store up my commandments within you, so as to turn your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding; yes, if you call out for discernment, and lift up your voice for understanding; if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God."

Think about how hard people work to find treasure: digging, searching, refusing to give up. That's how Proverbs says to look for wisdom. And then it gives a surprising twist. "For the LORD gives wisdom." You search for it, and in the end, God gives it to you as a gift.

Then comes one of the most famous passages in the Bible, in chapter 3. "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and don't lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight."

> **REAL TALK** **Trust With All Your Heart**
>
> Trusting God with all your heart means relying on Him completely, not just in church, but in every part of life: your friendships, your future, your fears, your decisions. Don't lean on your own understanding doesn't mean don't think. God gave you a brain, and He wants you to use it. It means don't make your own understanding the final authority. Your perspective is limited. You can't see the future. You don't know everything. So when your feelings or reasoning pull one way and God's word pulls another, trust Him. To acknowledge Him in all your ways means bringing Him into every decision. Pray about your choices. Ask what honors Him. And when it says He will make your paths straight, that doesn't mean your life will be easy or that you'll always know what's ahead. It means God will guide you and get you where you need to go.

The rest of the passage builds on that trust. "Don't be wise in your own eyes. Fear the LORD, and depart from evil." Honor the LORD with your money, giving Him the first and best, not the leftovers. And when God corrects you, don't resent it. "For whom the LORD loves, he corrects, even as a father reproves the son in whom he delights." God's correction is a sign of His love, not His rejection.

Chapter 3 also includes a simple command about kindness. "Don't let kindness and truth forsake you. Bind them around your neck.

Write them on the tablet of your heart." Kindness and truth go together. Truth without kindness can be cruel. Kindness without truth can be fake. Wisdom holds them together.

It's worth noticing how often Proverbs promises good things to those who follow wisdom: long life, peace, favor, health, full barns. Remember what we said at the start. These are principles, not guarantees. They describe the way God designed life to work, and they're generally true. But in a broken world, there are exceptions. That's why trusting God matters so much. You don't follow wisdom because it's a formula for getting what you want. You follow it because you trust the One who gives it.

Chapter 3 also contains a verse about doing good. "Don't withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in the power of your hand to do it." Wisdom isn't only about avoiding bad things. It's about doing good when you have the chance. If you can help someone today, don't put it off until tomorrow.

> **REAL TALK** **Wisdom Isn't Just for Smart People**
>
> Some teenagers assume wisdom is for straight-A students or people who always know the right thing to say. Proverbs disagrees. It says wisdom begins with the fear of the LORD, not with your test scores. A student who struggles in school can be deeply wise, and a brilliant student can be a complete fool. Wisdom shows up in how you treat people, how you handle temptation, how you spend your time, and whether you're willing to learn. Anyone can grow in it. All it takes is a humble heart and a willingness to listen to God.

KEY VERSE

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and don't lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

Proverbs 3:5–6 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between being afraid of God and fearing God in the way Proverbs describes?
2. Why do you think wisdom has to begin with God?
3. In what area of your life is it hardest to trust God instead of your own understanding?
4. Why is it important to remember that proverbs are principles, not promises?

TRY THIS *Pick one decision you're facing this week, big or small. Before you decide, pray about it, ask a wise adult for advice, and think about what would honor God.*

CHAPTER 2

Two Voices Calling

Proverbs 1–9

Imagine you're walking through a city, and two voices are calling out to you from opposite sides of the street. Both are inviting you into their house. Both promise a good time. One will lead you to life. The other will lead you to death. Which one will you follow?

That's the picture Proverbs 1 through 9 paints. Two women, Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly, are calling out to young people, each trying to win them over. They're personifications, ways of picturing wisdom and foolishness as people. But the choice they represent is very real.

Before we meet them, though, Proverbs warns about a different kind of invitation. "My son, if sinners entice you, don't consent." The parent describes a gang of young men inviting a friend to join them. Come with us, they say. Let's ambush someone, take what they have, and split the loot. Throw in your lot with us. We'll all share one purse.

> REAL TALK **Peer Pressure**
>
> The gang in Proverbs 1 doesn't say, come do something evil. They say, come be one of us. Their real pitch is belonging. That's how peer pressure usually works. It's rarely someone forcing you to do something. It's the desire to fit in, to be included, to not be left out. Proverbs says that the gang's plan will eventually destroy them. The trap they set for others will catch them instead.

> Sometimes the bravest thing you can do is say no and walk away, even if it means being alone for a while. And remember, real friends won't ask you to become someone you're not. If you're being pressured into something dangerous, illegal, or harmful, talk to a trusted adult.

Then Wisdom appears for the first time. "Wisdom calls aloud in the street. She utters her voice in the public squares." She isn't hiding in a library or a church. She's out in the busy places of life, where people make deals and decisions. And she's frustrated. "How long, you simple ones, will you love simplicity? How long will mockers delight themselves in mockery, and fools hate knowledge?"

She warns that if people ignore her, they'll eventually face the consequences of their own choices, and when disaster comes, it will be too late. But she ends with a promise. "But whoever listens to me will dwell securely, and will be at ease, without fear of harm."

Chapters 5 through 7 return again and again to one specific temptation: sexual sin. The parent warns the son about the adulteress, a woman who is unfaithful to her husband. "For the lips of an adulteress drip honey. Her mouth is smoother than oil, but in the end she is as bitter as wormwood, and as sharp as a two-edged sword."

In chapter 7, the parent tells a story. He's looking out his window at dusk and sees a young man, "void of understanding," walking down the street toward the house of a seductive woman. It's getting dark. She comes out to meet him, flatters him, and invites him in. Her husband is away, she says. No one will know. "With persuasive words, she led him astray." And he follows her "as an ox goes to the slaughter," not realizing it will cost him his life.

REAL TALK **Walking Toward Temptation**

Notice something about the young man in Proverbs 7. He didn't just stumble into trouble. He walked toward it. He went down her street, near her corner, at night. He put himself in a place where saying no would be almost impossible. That's a pattern with a lot of temptation. It's much easier to avoid the street than to resist once you're at the door. This applies to sexual temptation, including pornography and pressure in dating relationships, but also to other things: going to the party where you know there will be drugs, opening the app you know is bad for you, being alone with someone you know you shouldn't be. Wisdom means making decisions ahead of time about where you won't go. And if you've already made mistakes, God's grace is bigger than your failures. If someone has pressured or forced you into something sexual, that is not your fault. Please tell a trusted adult, or call RAINN at 1-800-656-4673.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why So Much About Sex?**

Proverbs 1 through 9 spends a lot of time on sexual temptation. Why? Partly because the original audience was young men about to enter adulthood, for whom this was a huge temptation. But it's also because the Bible sees sexuality as powerful and precious. God designed sex as a good gift to be enjoyed within the lifelong covenant of marriage. Chapter 5 actually celebrates married love, telling a husband to rejoice in his wife. The warnings aren't because sex is bad. They're because it's so good that misusing it can do deep damage to people, families, and communities.

It's important to say clearly that Proverbs warns about the adulteress because the original readers were young men, not because women are the problem. The same warnings apply in every direction. Anyone, male or female, can use flattery, pressure, or manipulation to lead someone into something harmful. And anyone can be the one walking down the wrong street. Wisdom is for everyone.

Then comes one of the most remarkable chapters in the Bible. In chapter 8, Wisdom speaks again, and this time she tells her own story. "Doesn't wisdom cry out? Doesn't understanding raise her voice?" She says her words are true and right, and that she's more valuable than silver, gold, or jewels. "For wisdom is better than rubies. All the things that may be desired can't be compared to it."

Then she goes all the way back to the beginning of the world. "The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his work, before his deeds of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, before the earth existed." Before the oceans, mountains, or fields existed, Wisdom was there. "When he established the heavens, I was there." When God set boundaries for the sea and marked out the foundations of the earth, "then I was the craftsman by his side. I was a delight day by day, always rejoicing before him, rejoicing in his whole world. My delight was with the sons of men."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Wisdom at Creation**

Proverbs 8 pictures Wisdom as being with God when He created the world, like a master builder working beside Him, and like a child playing joyfully in the new creation. It's a poetic way of saying that God built the world wisely. The universe has order, patterns, and design, which is why wise living works: it goes with the grain of how God made things. Living foolishly is like trying to build a house while ignoring the laws of physics. Early Christians saw something more in this passage. The New Testament describes Jesus, the Word of God, as being with God in the beginning, the One through whom "All things were made." Christians have debated how closely to connect Lady Wisdom with Jesus. Some see Proverbs 8 as a direct picture of Christ. Others see it as a poetic personification that Jesus fulfills in a deeper way. Either way, the New Testament calls Jesus the wisdom of God.

Then, in chapter 9, the two women make their final invitations. "Wisdom has built her house. She has carved out her seven pillars."

She has prepared a feast, set the table, and sent out invitations. From the highest point in the city, she calls: "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" Come, eat my bread and drink my wine. "Leave your simple ways, and live."

Then the scene shifts. Lady Folly is sitting at the door of her house. "The foolish woman is loud, undisciplined, and knows nothing." She calls out to people walking by, using almost exactly the same words: "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here." But her menu is different. "Stolen water is sweet. Food eaten in secret is pleasant." Her offer is the thrill of what's forbidden. But there's something her guests don't know. Her house is full of the dead.

REAL TALK **Same Invitation, Different Ending**

Notice that Wisdom and Folly use almost the same words to invite people in. That's the tricky part. Foolish choices rarely look foolish at first. They look exciting, fun, and freeing. Folly's pitch, stolen water is sweet, is the pitch behind a lot of temptation: the forbidden thing must be better, because it's forbidden. Wisdom's invitation sounds less exciting at first, but it leads to life. When you face a choice, don't just ask what feels good right now. Ask where this path leads. Look past the front door to what's inside the house.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Seven Pillars**

Wisdom's house in Proverbs 9 has seven pillars. Scholars aren't sure exactly what they represent. In the Bible, seven often symbolizes completeness, so the seven pillars may picture a house that is perfectly built, strong, and complete. Some think it echoes the seven days of creation, connecting Wisdom's house to the world God built with wisdom in Proverbs 8. Either way, it's a picture of stability. Folly's house has no foundation at all. Its guests are already in the grave.

Here's the thing about Proverbs 1 through 9: it doesn't pretend the choice is easy. Folly is attractive. It's loud, exciting, and right there on the corner. Wisdom requires patience, discipline, and trust. But

the parent in Proverbs keeps pleading, over and over, because he loves his child and can see where each path leads. When adults who love you warn you about something, it may feel like they're trying to ruin your fun. Often, they're just trying to keep you out of Folly's house, because they've seen what's inside.

KEY VERSE

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. The knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

Proverbs 9:10 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the gang in Proverbs 1 focused on belonging instead of the crime itself?
2. What "streets" do you need to avoid to stay away from temptation?
3. What does Proverbs 8 say about the way God made the world? Why does that matter for how we live?
4. How are Lady Wisdom's and Lady Folly's invitations similar? How are they different?

TRY THIS *Think about one area where you're tempted to walk down Folly's street. Make a specific plan to avoid it this week, and tell someone you trust about your plan.*

CHAPTER 3

Words and Reputation

Proverbs 10–26 (selected)

If you added up every proverb about one topic, the winner might be words. Proverbs talks about the tongue, the lips, and the mouth more than almost anything else. Why? Because words have enormous power, more than most of us realize.

Here's the big one. "Death and life are in the power of the tongue; those who love it will eat its fruit." Your words can give life: encouraging, comforting, guiding, healing. Or they can bring death: crushing, shaming, destroying. And whatever you plant with your words, you'll eventually eat.

Proverbs puts it another way too. "There is one who speaks rashly like the piercing of a sword, but the tongue of the wise heals." Words can stab. Words can heal. Most of us have experienced both.

REAL TALK **Words Online**

Proverbs was written long before phones, but it's never been more relevant. Today, your words can reach thousands of people in seconds, and they can stay online forever. A cruel comment, a screenshot, a rumor in a group chat, or an angry post can spread like wildfire and do damage you can never fully undo. James wrote, "See how a small fire can spread to a large forest!" Before you post, text, or comment, ask yourself: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? Would I say it to their face? Would I be okay if my grandmother, my future boss, or God read it? And if someone is using words to harass, bully, or

> threaten you online, save the evidence and tell a trusted adult. You don't have to face it alone.

Proverbs has a lot to say about gossip. "The words of a gossip are like dainty morsels: they go down into a person's innermost parts." Gossip is tasty. It's fun to hear and fun to share. That's what makes it so dangerous. It goes down easily and sticks.

"One who brings gossip betrays a confidence, but one who is of a trustworthy spirit is one who keeps a secret." If someone tells you a secret, and you pass it on, you've betrayed them. And Proverbs warns about friends who gossip: "therefore don't keep company with him who opens wide his lips." If someone gossips to you about others, they're probably gossiping about you too.

Here's a picture that explains how gossip keeps drama alive. "For lack of wood a fire goes out. Without gossip, a quarrel dies down." Every piece of gossip is another log on the fire. If you stop passing it on, the fire eventually goes out.

> **REAL TALK** **How to Stop Gossip**
>
> It's hard not to gossip, especially when everyone around you is doing it. Here are a few ideas. When someone starts gossiping, change the subject. Or ask, have you talked to them about this? Or simply say, I don't feel comfortable talking about them when they're not here. Don't forward screenshots or repeat rumors. If you hear something about someone, ask whether it's true, kind, and your business. And if you've gossiped and hurt someone, apologize. You'll be amazed how much drama disappears when you refuse to be the fuel.

Proverbs also talks about how to handle conflict with words. "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." When someone yells at you, your instinct might be to yell back. But a calm, gentle response often lowers the temperature. It doesn't

mean being a pushover. It means choosing not to pour gasoline on the fire.

Proverbs praises the person who thinks before speaking. “The heart of the righteous weighs answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes out evil.” And: “He who answers before he hears, that is folly and shame to him.” How many arguments start because someone responded before they really listened?

Sometimes the wisest thing is to say less. “In the multitude of words there is no lack of disobedience, but he who restrains his lips does wisely.” The more you talk, the more likely you are to say something you’ll regret. “Whoever guards his mouth and his tongue keeps his soul from troubles.”

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Answer a Fool, or Don’t?**
>
> Proverbs 26:4 and 26:5 sit right next to each other and seem to say opposite things. “Don’t answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him.” Then: “Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.” Which is it? Both. The editors put them side by side on purpose. Sometimes arguing with a foolish person just drags you down to their level, so it’s better to stay quiet. Other times, if you say nothing, they’ll think they’re right and keep doing harm, so you need to speak up. Wisdom is knowing which situation you’re in. That’s a great example of why proverbs aren’t mechanical rules. They require discernment. Think about online arguments: sometimes it’s wise to scroll past, and sometimes it’s right to speak the truth.

Words can also bring life. “Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs it down, but a kind word makes it glad.” “Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones.” “A gentle tongue is a tree of life.” And here’s a beautiful one: “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.” The right word at the right time is like a piece of fine jewelry, a precious gift.

REAL TALK **Sarcasm and Jokes**

Proverbs 26 describes a person who deceives a neighbor and then says, I was only joking. That's like someone throwing firebrands and arrows. A lot of hurtful words today come wrapped in humor: roasting, sarcasm, and jokes at someone else's expense. Teasing between close friends can be fun, but it's easy to cross a line. If someone is hurt, saying it was just a joke doesn't undo the damage. Pay attention to whether everyone is laughing, or only some people.

Proverbs also connects words with reputation. "A good name is more desirable than great riches." Your name, meaning your reputation, your character as others know it, is worth more than money. And your words build it or destroy it. Proverbs warns against bragging: "Let another man praise you, and not your own mouth." And it warns against lying: "Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who do the truth are his delight."

REAL TALK **Your Digital Reputation**

In the ancient world, your reputation lived in your town. Today, it also lives online, and it can follow you for years. Colleges and employers sometimes look at social media. Friends take screenshots. Things you post at fourteen can resurface at twenty-four. That's not meant to scare you. It's a reason to think about what kind of name you want. Proverbs says even a child is known by his actions. You're building your reputation now, one post, one word, one choice at a time. And if you've made mistakes, the good news is that reputations can be rebuilt with time, honesty, and consistent good choices.

REAL TALK **The Power of a Compliment**

Proverbs says pleasant words are sweet to the soul and health to the bones. Researchers have found that kind words really do affect people's well-being. A sincere compliment, a word of encouragement, or a simple thank you can change someone's whole day. Try noticing something good about someone

> and telling them specifically. Not just nice job, but I really admired how you handled that. You may never know how much it meant to them.

It's also worth noticing how often Proverbs connects words with listening. The wise person listens before speaking, weighs answers carefully, and is slow to respond. In a world where everyone wants to be heard, listening has become rare, and valuable. Try it with a friend this week. Ask a question, then really listen to the answer without planning what you'll say next. You may find that listening is one of the most life-giving things your words can do.

KEY VERSE

Death and life are in the power of the tongue; those who love it will eat its fruit.

Proverbs 18:21 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Think of a time when someone's words gave you life. Think of a time when words hurt you. Which did you remember longer?
2. Why is gossip so tempting? What makes it so destructive?
3. When was the last time a gentle answer, from you or someone else, calmed a conflict?
4. What kind of reputation do you want to have? What words would help you build it?

TRY THIS *For one day, try to say only things that are true, kind, and necessary, in person and online. At the end of the day, write down what you noticed.*

CHAPTER 4

Friends, Drama, and Anger

Proverbs 12–29 (selected)

Your friends will shape you more than almost anything else. Proverbs knows that. "One who walks with wise men grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm."

That's a simple principle, but it's incredibly powerful. You become like the people you spend the most time with. Their habits, attitudes, language, and values rub off on you, often without you even noticing. Spend time with people who are kind, honest, and growing, and you'll grow too. Spend time with people who are cruel, reckless, or always in trouble, and you'll get hurt.

> REAL TALK **Choosing Your Circle**
>
> This doesn't mean you should only hang out with perfect people, or that you should drop someone the moment they make a mistake. Jesus was a friend of sinners, and we're called to love everyone. But there's a difference between being kind to someone and letting them shape you. Your closest friends, the ones you trust, confide in, and follow, should be people who pull you toward good things. Ask yourself: When I'm with this person, do I become a better version of myself, or a worse one? Do they encourage me to make good choices, or bad ones? It can be painful to step back from a friendship, but sometimes it's the wisest thing you can do.

What does a good friend look like? Proverbs gives a lot of answers. "A friend loves at all times; and a brother is born for adversity." A

true friend sticks around when things get hard. Proverbs contrasts that with fair-weather friends. "A man of many companions may be ruined, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." It's better to have a few loyal friends than hundreds of followers.

A good friend is also honest with you. "Better is open rebuke than hidden love. The wounds of a friend are faithful, although the kisses of an enemy are profuse." A real friend will tell you the truth, even when it hurts. An enemy might flatter you to your face and stab you in the back.

And then there's one of the most famous proverbs about friendship. "Iron sharpens iron; so a man sharpens his friend's countenance."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Iron Sharpens Iron**

In the ancient world, a blade was sharpened by rubbing it against another piece of iron. The process involved friction and sparks, but both pieces came out sharper. Good friendships work the same way. Friends sharpen each other by challenging each other, asking hard questions, disagreeing respectfully, and pushing each other to grow. That means good friendship isn't always comfortable. Sometimes there's friction. But the result is that both people become sharper, wiser, and stronger. A friendship where you never challenge each other might be comfortable, but it isn't making either of you better.

REAL TALK **Signs of a Toxic Friendship**

Proverbs warns against friends who gossip, who have a hot temper, and who flatter you while hiding bad intentions. Today we might call some of those friendships toxic. Signs can include: they make you feel bad about yourself, they pressure you into things you don't want to do, they're jealous or controlling, they gossip about you, they only show up when they need something, or you feel anxious or drained after spending time with them. If you see those patterns, it's okay to set boundaries or step back. And if a

friend, boyfriend, or girlfriend is threatening you, controlling you, or hurting you, please talk to a trusted adult right away.

Proverbs also has a lot to say about how to handle drama and conflict. "He who covers an offense promotes love; but he who repeats a matter separates best friends." When a friend hurts you, you have a choice. You can let it go, or you can keep bringing it up and telling others about it. Proverbs says that keeping score and spreading the story destroys friendships. "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all wrongs."

That doesn't mean you should ignore serious problems. Some things need to be talked about. But a lot of drama comes from small things that get blown up because people won't let them go. "The discretion of a man makes him slow to anger. It is his glory to overlook an offense." Choosing not to take offense at every little thing is a sign of maturity.

Then there's anger. Proverbs is full of warnings about it. "He who is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a quick temper displays folly." "A fool vents all of his anger, but a wise man brings himself under control." "A wrathful man stirs up contention, but one who is slow to anger appeases strife."

And here's a proverb that redefines strength. "One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty; one who rules his spirit, than he who takes a city." Controlling your temper is a bigger accomplishment than conquering a city. That's because it's harder.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A City Without Walls**

Proverbs 25:28 says, "Like a city that is broken down and without walls is a man whose spirit is without restraint." In the ancient world, a city's walls were its protection. A city without walls was open to anyone who wanted to attack it. Proverbs says a person without self-control is just as vulnerable.

Without self-control, every impulse, temptation, and angry feeling can come rushing in and take over. Self-control isn't about being uptight. It's about having healthy walls that protect what matters.

REAL TALK **Handling Your Anger**

Anger itself isn't always wrong. God gets angry at injustice, and so did Jesus. But uncontrolled anger hurts people, including you. If you struggle with your temper, here are a few things that can help. Notice the warning signs in your body, like a racing heart, clenched fists, or a hot face. Walk away before you say or do something you'll regret. Breathe slowly. Go for a run. Write down what you're feeling. Talk to someone you trust once you've calmed down. And pray. If anger is causing serious problems in your relationships, at school, or at home, or if you're afraid you might hurt someone, talk to a counselor or trusted adult. If you're ever in danger, call 911.

Proverbs also says something wise about drama: some fights aren't worth joining. Proverbs 26 compares meddling in a quarrel that isn't yours to grabbing a stray dog by the ears. You'll get bitten. Not every argument in the group chat needs your opinion. Sometimes the wisest thing you can do is stay out of it, pray, and be kind to everyone involved.

Proverbs also warns about being friends with angry people. "Don't befriend a hot-tempered man. Don't associate with one who harbors anger, lest you learn his ways and ensnare your soul." Anger is contagious.

And it warns against revenge. "Don't say, 'I will pay back evil.' Wait for the LORD, and he will save you." Proverbs even says not to celebrate when your enemy falls. That's a remarkable standard, centuries before Jesus taught His followers to love their enemies.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jonathan and David**

The Bible's most famous friendship is between David and Jonathan, King Saul's son. Jonathan should have been David's rival, since David was chosen to be king instead of him. But Jonathan loved David, protected him from Saul's anger, and encouraged him to trust God, even at great cost to himself. Their friendship is a living picture of Proverbs: a friend who loves at all times, who sticks closer than a brother, and who sharpens his friend toward God.

Proverbs also offers a quiet word about loneliness. "A neighbor who is near is better than a distant brother." Sometimes the people who help you most aren't the ones you'd expect. If you feel like you don't have good friends right now, that's painful, and you're not alone. Pray for a friend. Look for people who are kind and growing, even if they're not in the popular crowd. Join a youth group, club, team, or volunteer group. And try being the kind of friend Proverbs describes. Often the best way to find a good friend is to be one.

KEY VERSE

Iron sharpens iron; so a man sharpens his friend's countenance.

Proverbs 27:17 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Who are the people you spend the most time with? How are they shaping you?
2. What's the difference between a friend who sharpens you and a toxic friend?
3. When is it wise to overlook an offense, and when do you need to talk about it?
4. What helps you control your anger? What makes it harder?

TRY THIS *Think of a friend who sharpens you. This week, tell them how much you appreciate them, and ask them to keep being honest with you.*

CHAPTER 5

Work, Money, and Integrity

Proverbs 6; 10–30 (selected)

Proverbs has some surprisingly practical advice about work, and it starts with a tiny teacher. “Go to the ant, you sluggard. Consider her ways, and be wise; which having no chief, overseer, or ruler, provides her bread in the summer, and gathers her food in the harvest.”

A sluggard is a lazy person, and Proverbs has a lot of fun with this character. The sluggard turns over in bed like a door on its hinges. He’s so lazy he puts his hand in the dish and won’t even lift it to his mouth. He makes excuses: There’s a lion outside! I’ll be killed in the streets! Anything to avoid going to work.

But the ant is different. No one has to tell her what to do. There’s no boss standing over her. She just works, steadily and wisely, storing up food in the summer so she’ll have enough in the winter.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Wisdom of Ants**

Ancient people noticed that ants gather and store food, and modern scientists have confirmed just how organized they are. Harvester ants collect seeds and store them in underground chambers. Some colonies have millions of workers, each doing a specific job, with no single leader giving orders. They cooperate, plan ahead, and keep working even when no one is watching. Proverbs points to them as a model for anyone who struggles with motivation.

Then Proverbs gives a warning. “How long will you sleep, sluggard? When will you arise out of your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep—so your poverty will come as a robber, and your scarcity as an armed man.”

Notice the phrase a little. Laziness doesn’t usually ruin your life in one big moment. It sneaks up on you. A little more sleep. A little more scrolling. One more episode. I’ll do it tomorrow. Then one day you realize the assignment is due, the opportunity is gone, or the habit is set.

> **REAL TALK** **Procrastination**
>
> Almost everyone procrastinates sometimes. You have a big project, and suddenly cleaning your room or reorganizing your playlist seems really important. Procrastination isn’t always laziness. Sometimes it comes from fear of failing, feeling overwhelmed, or not knowing where to start. A few things can help. Break big tasks into small steps. Set a timer and work for just twenty minutes. Put your phone in another room. Tell someone your goal so they can check on you. Celebrate small wins. And remember the ant: steady, small efforts add up over time. If you feel stuck all the time, unable to start anything, or exhausted no matter how much you sleep, that might be a sign of something like depression or anxiety, so talk to a parent, counselor, or doctor.

Proverbs connects hard work with good results. “He becomes poor who works with a lazy hand, but the hand of the diligent brings wealth.” “The soul of the sluggard desires, and has nothing, but the desire of the diligent shall be fully satisfied.” The sluggard wants things, but he doesn’t work for them.

Remember, though, that these are principles. Proverbs isn’t saying that all poor people are lazy. In fact, it says a lot about poverty caused by injustice, oppression, and disaster. And it isn’t saying that

hard work always makes you rich. It's saying that, generally, diligence leads to provision and laziness leads to lack.

Proverbs cares deeply about how you get your money. "A false balance is an abomination to the LORD, but accurate weights are his delight." In ancient markets, merchants used scales and weights to measure goods. A dishonest merchant might use one set of weights when buying and another when selling, cheating customers without them knowing. God hates that kind of cheating.

> **REAL TALK** **Honest Scales Today**
>
> You might not use a set of scales, but the principle still applies. Honest scales mean doing your own homework instead of copying. It means not using AI or someone else's work and calling it your own when you're not supposed to. It means telling the truth on your timesheet at work, giving back extra change when a cashier makes a mistake, and not lying about a product you're selling online. It means being the same person when no one is watching. Integrity is doing the right thing even when you could get away with the wrong thing. "He who walks blamelessly walks surely, but he who perverts his ways will be found out."

Proverbs also warns that dishonest money doesn't last. "Wealth gained dishonestly dwindles away, but he who gathers by hand makes it grow." Get-rich-quick schemes, cheating, and shortcuts may seem to pay off for a while, but they usually collapse. Slow, honest, steady effort builds something that lasts.

And Proverbs says that integrity is worth more than money. "Better is the poor who walks in his integrity than he who is perverse in his ways, and he is rich." A clean conscience is worth more than a fat bank account.

Proverbs also gives some very practical money advice. "The rich rule over the poor. The borrower is servant to the lender." Debt can

become a kind of slavery. That doesn't mean all borrowing is wrong, but it's a warning to be careful. Many adults today are crushed by credit card debt, student loans, and payments for things they couldn't really afford.

> **REAL TALK** **Money Habits Start Now**
>
> The money habits you build as a teenager will probably follow you into adulthood. A few wise habits from Proverbs: Spend less than you earn. Save some of every dollar you get, even if it's small. Be careful about debt, especially high-interest credit cards and buy-now-pay-later plans. Don't fall for get-rich-quick schemes, including some online investment hype. Give generously. And remember that money is a tool, not a god. Jesus said you can't serve both God and money.

But the biggest money theme in Proverbs isn't saving or earning. It's generosity. "There is one who scatters, and increases yet more. There is one who withholds more than is appropriate, but gains poverty. The liberal soul shall be made fat. He who waters shall be watered also himself."

That's a surprising principle. Generous people often end up richer, not always in money, but in joy, friendship, and blessing. Stingy people often end up poorer, even if they hold on to every penny.

Proverbs especially cares about the poor. "He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for his Maker, but he who is kind to the needy honors him." How you treat the poor is how you treat God, because God made them. And here's a remarkable one: "He who has pity on the poor lends to the LORD; he will reward him." When you give to someone in need, it's as if you're lending to God Himself, and God always pays His debts.

Proverbs also warns what happens to those who ignore the poor. "Whoever stops his ears at the cry of the poor, he will also cry out, but shall not be heard."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Proverbs and the Poor**

Proverbs is sometimes misread as saying that poor people are always to blame for their poverty. That's not true. Yes, Proverbs warns that laziness can lead to poverty. But it also talks about poverty caused by injustice, oppression, and the greed of the powerful. It condemns those who move boundary stones to steal land, who cheat with false weights, and who take advantage of the weak. It calls God the defender of the poor. Proverbs paints a balanced picture: individuals are responsible for their choices, and communities are responsible for caring for the vulnerable.

REAL TALK **Your First Job**

Many teenagers get their first job during high school, like babysitting, mowing lawns, working at a restaurant, or helping at a family business. Proverbs has great advice for that first job. Show up on time. Work hard even when no one is watching. Be honest about your hours and your mistakes. Treat customers and coworkers with respect. Learn from people who have more experience. Save some of what you earn. And give some away. A reputation as a reliable, honest worker will open doors for the rest of your life.

Proverbs also warns about pride, which often comes with success. "Pride goes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall." And: "When pride comes, then comes shame, but with humility comes wisdom." Success can make you think you did it all yourself. Proverbs reminds you that God directs your steps. "A man's heart plans his course, but the LORD directs his steps." And: "Don't boast about tomorrow; for you don't know what a day may bring."

So make plans, work hard, be honest, save wisely, and give generously. But hold it all loosely, because your future is in God's

hands, not yours. "Commit your deeds to the LORD, and your plans shall succeed."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Seven Things God Hates**
>
> Proverbs 6 contains a list of seven things the LORD hates: arrogant eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that rush into evil, a false witness who tells lies, and one who stirs up conflict among family and friends. Notice how many of them involve words and attitudes, not just actions. Lying shows up twice. And the last one, sowing discord, is a reminder that God cares deeply about unity and relationships. Integrity isn't only about how you handle money. It's about the whole person.

Work in Proverbs isn't just about money, though. It's about faithfulness. The ant isn't trying to become famous or rich. She's just doing her job well, day after day. That kind of steady faithfulness is one of the most underrated qualities in the world. It shows up in the student who does homework carefully, the athlete who shows up to practice, the employee who works hard even when the boss isn't around, and the friend who keeps their promises. Paul later wrote that whatever you do, you should work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord. Your homework, your chores, and your part-time job can all be acts of worship.

KEY VERSE

The liberal soul shall be made fat. He who waters shall be watered also himself.

Proverbs 11:25 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What can you learn from the ant? Where in your life do you most need that lesson?
2. What are some modern examples of dishonest scales?
3. Why do you think Proverbs says generous people end up richer?
4. How does knowing that God directs your steps change the way you make plans?

TRY THIS *This week, give something away generously: money, time, or something you own. Then make a simple plan to save a small amount of every dollar you receive this month.*

CHAPTER 6

Heart, Boundaries, and Family

Proverbs 4; 13–31 (selected)

If you could protect only one thing in your life, what would it be? Proverbs has an answer. “Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it is the wellspring of life.”

In the Bible, the heart isn’t just your emotions. It’s the center of who you are: your thoughts, desires, choices, and loves. Everything you do flows out of it, like water from a spring. If the spring is poisoned, everything downstream is poisoned too. If it’s clean, life flows out.

That’s why Proverbs says to guard it. Not just watch it casually, but guard it with all diligence, like a soldier on duty.

> REAL TALK **Guarding Your Heart**
>
> What does it look like to guard your heart? It means paying attention to what goes in. The shows you watch, the music you listen to, the content you scroll through, the friends you trust, and the relationships you get into all shape your heart. Proverbs continues: put away a perverse mouth, let your eyes look straight ahead, and watch the path of your feet. Guard your mouth, your eyes, and your feet, and you’ll protect your heart. This doesn’t mean shutting out the world or never feeling anything. It means being thoughtful about what you let shape you. It also applies to dating. Guarding your heart means not giving it away too quickly or to someone who won’t take care of it.

Boundaries are part of guarding your heart. A boundary is like a fence that protects what’s valuable. Healthy boundaries mean you

can say no to things that would harm you, even when others want you to say yes. Proverbs talks about avoiding certain people, places, and paths, not because you think you're better than anyone, but because you know your heart is precious.

Proverbs also warns about a sneaky danger. "There is a way which seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." Your heart can deceive you. Something can feel completely right and still be wrong. That's why you need God's word and wise people around you to help you see clearly.

> **REAL TALK** **Fear of Man**
>
> Proverbs 29:25 says, "The fear of man proves to be a snare, but whoever puts his trust in the LORD is kept safe." The fear of man is caring so much about what other people think that you'll do almost anything to please them. It's a trap. It can make you go along with things you know are wrong, stay silent when you should speak up, or base your whole worth on likes and approval. The cure isn't to stop caring about people. It's to care more about what God thinks. When you know you're loved and accepted by Him, you're free to say no to the crowd.

Guarding your heart also means paying attention to your inner life. What are you worried about? What do you want most? What are you angry about? What thoughts keep coming back? Proverbs encourages you to look inward honestly, and to bring what you find to God. Journaling, prayer, and talking with someone you trust can all help you understand what's happening in your heart. You can't guard what you never look at.

Proverbs also has a lot to say about family. Remember, much of the book is written as a parent speaking to a child. "My son, listen to your father's instruction, and don't forsake your mother's teaching; for they will be a garland to grace your head, and chains around

your neck." Wise instruction from parents is like jewelry that makes you more beautiful.

The New Testament repeats this. Paul wrote, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." He quoted the commandment, "Honor your father and mother," and pointed out it comes with a promise. But Paul also wrote to parents: "You fathers, don't provoke your children to wrath, but nurture them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Honor goes both ways.

> **REAL TALK** **Honoring Imperfect Parents**
>
> Honoring your parents doesn't mean pretending they're perfect. No parent is. It means treating them with respect, listening to their advice, being honest with them, and appreciating what they've done for you. It's possible to disagree with your parents respectfully. It's also possible to honor parents who have hurt you, by being honest, setting healthy boundaries, and refusing to be cruel in return. Honoring them never means obeying them when they ask you to do something wrong or harmful, and it never means staying silent about abuse. If your family situation is complicated because of divorce, addiction, absence, or conflict, talk to a pastor or counselor who can help you figure out what honoring looks like for you.

It's worth saying that most families aren't facing abuse, but many face real conflict. Arguments about phones, curfews, grades, chores, friends, and faith are normal. Proverbs offers wisdom here too: a gentle answer turns away wrath, listening before speaking prevents misunderstandings, and humility helps everyone. Try having hard conversations when everyone is calm, not in the middle of a fight. Assume the best about each other. And remember that your parents are learning too.

Proverbs also has several verses about discipline that can be hard to read. "One who spares the rod hates his son, but one who loves him

is careful to discipline him." "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of discipline drives it far from him." "Don't withhold correction from a child. If you punish him with the rod, he will not die."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hard Passage: The Rod of Discipline**

Verses about the rod of discipline have been understood in different ways. Some Christians believe they support careful, limited physical discipline, such as spanking young children, done calmly and lovingly, never in anger, and never causing injury. Others believe the rod is a picture of discipline in general, pointing out that the same Hebrew word is used for a shepherd's staff, which guides and protects sheep, and that the main point is that loving parents correct their children rather than ignoring their behavior. Many Christians today choose non-physical forms of discipline, and child development experts generally recommend them. Christians disagree on spanking, and families should think this through prayerfully. But on one thing, all faithful readers should agree: Proverbs never gives permission for abuse. Discipline in Proverbs is always connected to love, wisdom, and the good of the child. Abuse is something completely different. Hitting in anger, beating, leaving marks or injuries, humiliating, threatening, starving, locking up, or terrifying a child is not biblical discipline. It is abuse, and God hates it. Jesus welcomed children and gave strong warnings to anyone who would harm them. The goal of biblical discipline is a child who grows in wisdom and feels safe and loved. If the result is a child who is afraid, injured, or crushed, something has gone terribly wrong.

REAL TALK **If You're Being Hurt at Home**

If an adult in your home is hurting you, threatening you, leaving marks or bruises, touching you inappropriately, or making you afraid for your safety, that is not your fault, and it is not discipline. You deserve to be safe. Please tell a trusted adult right away: a teacher, school counselor, coach, pastor, or another relative. You can call or text Childhelp at 1-800-422-4453 any time, day or night, to talk with someone who can help. If you're in danger right

now, call 911. If you're feeling hopeless or thinking about hurting yourself, call or text 988. Telling someone is not betraying your family. It's protecting yourself, and maybe others too.

Proverbs also talks about receiving correction well, and that applies to everyone, not just children. "He who conceals his sins doesn't prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy." Wise people can admit when they're wrong. They listen to correction and learn from it. Fools get defensive. The writer of Hebrews put it this way: "All chastening seems for the present to be not joyous but grievous; yet afterward it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

Finally, Proverbs has one of the most quoted and misunderstood verses about families. "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Proverbs 22:6**

Many parents have taken comfort from this verse. Many others have been crushed by it, because they raised their children faithfully and those children walked away from God. Is the verse a guarantee? Remember what we said at the start: proverbs are principles, not promises. Proverbs 22:6 describes a general pattern. Children who are trained wisely and lovingly often carry those values with them for life. But children are not robots. They make their own choices, and even good parents can have children who wander. God Himself is a perfect Father, and His children, Adam and Eve and Israel, rebelled against Him. If you're a teenager wrestling with your faith, this verse is not a threat. And if you have a sibling who has walked away, it's not a verdict on your parents. Keep praying. The story isn't over.

Proverbs also reminds us that family is meant to be a place of growth for everyone. Parents learn from their children, too. Grandparents pass down stories and faith. Siblings sharpen each other, sometimes with a lot of friction. Proverbs calls grandchildren

the crown of the aged, and fathers the glory of their children. A family isn't a perfect team. It's a group of imperfect people learning, together, how to love each other wisely.

KEY VERSE

Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it is the wellspring of life.

Proverbs 4:23 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What are you letting into your heart that might be shaping you more than you realize?
2. What's one healthy boundary you need to set right now?
3. What does it look like to honor your parents, even when you disagree with them?
4. Why is it so important to understand the difference between discipline and abuse?

TRY THIS *Write a short note or text to a parent or guardian, thanking them for something specific they've taught you. If home doesn't feel safe, talk to a trusted adult this week instead.*

CHAPTER 7

Agur and Lemuel's Mother

Proverbs 30–31

The last two chapters of Proverbs come from two people we know almost nothing about. Their voices are different from Solomon's, and they make a fitting ending to the book.

Chapter 30 begins, "The words of Agur the son of Jakeh." We don't know who Agur was. He might not even have been an Israelite. And he starts with something surprising for a wisdom writer: he says he doesn't know very much. "Surely I am the most ignorant man, and don't have a man's understanding. I have not learned wisdom, neither do I have the knowledge of the Holy One."

> REAL TALK **The Humility of Agur**
>
> Agur is a breath of fresh air. After twenty-nine chapters of confident advice, here's a wise man who says, honestly, I don't know much. That's not false modesty. It's real humility. The more you learn, the more you realize how much you don't know. Some of the wisest people in history have also been the most humble. Agur reminds us that wisdom isn't about having all the answers. It's about knowing who does. You don't have to pretend to be smarter than you are. It's okay to say, I don't know.

Then Agur asks a series of questions that sound a lot like God's questions to Job. "Who has ascended up into heaven, and descended? Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has bound

the waters in his garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son's name, if you know?"

The answer, of course, is God. Only He controls the wind and the waters. And Agur's question about the son's name has made Christians think of Jesus, the Son who came down from heaven.

Then Agur says something about God's word. "Every word of God is flawless. He is a shield to those who take refuge in him." Even though Agur doesn't know much, he knows where to find truth.

And then he prays one of the most practical prayers in the Bible. "Two things I have asked of you. Don't deny me before I die. Remove far from me falsehood and lies. Give me neither poverty nor riches. Feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full, deny you, and say, 'Who is the LORD?' or lest I be poor, and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God."

> **REAL TALK** **Neither Poverty Nor Riches**
>
> Agur's prayer is wise because he knows himself. He knows that if he has too much, he might forget God and think he doesn't need Him. And he knows that if he has too little, he might be tempted to steal. So he asks for just enough. That's the opposite of what our culture usually wants. We're told to want more: more money, more stuff, more followers, more of everything. Agur asks for enough. Jesus taught His disciples to pray something similar: give us today our daily bread. What would it look like for you to be content with enough?

Agur also loves lists. He has several numbered lists, like riddles: three things that are never satisfied, four things too amazing to understand, four things that are small but wise. "There are three things which are too amazing for me, four which I don't understand: The way of an eagle in the air, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship in the middle of the sea, and the way of a

man with a maiden." Agur notices the world carefully and lets himself be amazed. That's a kind of wisdom too.

Chapter 31 begins with an unusual introduction. "The words of King Lemuel—the revelation which his mother taught him." We don't know who Lemuel was either. But we know his mother was a wise woman who gave her son serious advice about how to be a good king.

She warns him not to waste his strength on women who would destroy him, and not to get drunk, because drunk kings forget the law and fail to protect the vulnerable. And then she gives him a charge that's still powerful today. "Open your mouth for the mute, in the cause of all who are left desolate. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and serve justice to the poor and needy."

> **REAL TALK** **Speak Up for the Voiceless**
>
> Lemuel's mother taught her son that power comes with responsibility. A king's job wasn't to enjoy luxury. It was to protect people who couldn't protect themselves. You might not be a king, but you have more influence than you think. You can speak up when someone is being bullied. You can stand with a classmate who is excluded or mocked because of who they are. You can care about the unborn, the disabled, the elderly, refugees, children in poverty, victims of trafficking, and others who often have no voice. Proverbs 24 says, "Rescue those who are being led away to death!" Wisdom isn't just about your own life. It's about using your voice for others.

Lemuel's mother also has something to say about alcohol. She warns that kings shouldn't drink, because drunkenness makes them forget the law and pervert justice for the oppressed. Proverbs elsewhere warns that wine is a mocker and that people who linger over drinks end up with bruises they can't explain and eyes that see strange things. For teenagers, alcohol and drugs are not only illegal

but especially harmful to a developing brain. If you or a friend is struggling with substance use, please talk to a trusted adult. Asking for help is a wise choice, not a weak one.

Then Proverbs ends with one of its most famous passages, a poem about a woman of strength. "Who can find a worthy woman? For her value is far above rubies."

The poem is an acrostic, like some of the Psalms. Each of its twenty-two verses begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet, as if to say, here is excellence from A to Z.

And what a woman she is. She works eagerly with her hands. She's like a merchant ship, bringing food from far away. She gets up before dawn. She evaluates a field and buys it, then plants a vineyard with her own earnings. "She arms her waist with strength, and makes her arms strong." She runs a successful business making and selling clothing. "She opens her arms to the poor; yes, she extends her hands to the needy." She isn't worried about the future. "Strength and dignity are her clothing. She laughs at the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom. Kind instruction is on her tongue."

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Woman of Valor**

The Hebrew phrase translated worthy woman is eshet chayil. The word chayil is often used for strength, ability, wealth, and even military valor. It's the same word used for mighty warriors in the Old Testament. So this poem isn't describing a quiet, weak woman. It's describing a woman of strength, courage, and excellence. In Jewish tradition, Proverbs 31 is often sung by husbands to their wives on Friday nights at the start of the Sabbath, as a song of praise, not a checklist. And Jewish women sometimes encourage each other by saying eshet chayil, woman of valor, when they see one another doing something brave or good. In the Hebrew Bible, the book of Ruth comes right after Proverbs, and Boaz calls Ruth an eshet chayil, a worthy woman.

She was a poor widow and a foreigner, not a wealthy businesswoman. Her strength was her character.

REAL TALK **Celebration, Not Comparison**

Some people read Proverbs 31 as an impossible checklist that every woman must live up to: get up before dawn, run a business, sew clothes, manage a household, help the poor, and never be afraid. If that's how you read it, you'll probably feel like a failure. But that's not how the poem works. It's a portrait of wisdom in action, a celebration of strength, competence, and character. It's the final picture of Lady Wisdom from chapters 1 through 9, now living out wisdom in real life. Notice what it praises most: not her looks, but her character. "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain; but a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised." For girls, the message is that God values your strength, intelligence, work, compassion, and courage, not just your appearance. For guys, the message is to admire and look for character, not just looks, and to praise the strong, wise women in your life. And for everyone, it's a picture of what it looks like to live wisely.

Notice how the book of Proverbs ends where it began. It started with "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge." It ends with "a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised." The whole book is framed by the fear of the LORD. Wisdom begins there, and wisdom ends there.

The very last line of Proverbs says, "Give her of the fruit of her hands! Let her works praise her in the gates!" The city gates were where leaders gathered and important decisions were made. Proverbs ends by saying that a wise life speaks for itself, in public, for everyone to see.

It's also beautiful that the last voice in Proverbs is a mother's. The book began with a parent's instruction, and it ends with a mother teaching her son how to lead, how to protect the vulnerable, and what kind of character to admire. Wisdom is handed down.

Somewhere in your life, there are people who have been handing it down to you. Someday, you'll hand it down to others.

As we come to the end of Proverbs, it's worth stepping back. Proverbs isn't a book you read once and finish. It's a book you live with. Many Christians read one chapter of Proverbs a day, matching the date on the calendar, so they read the whole book every month. Over years, its sayings sink in and come to mind exactly when you need them: when you're about to send an angry text, when a friend is pressuring you, when you're tempted to cheat, when you're deciding how to spend your money. Wisdom grows slowly, like a tree. But it grows.

KEY VERSE

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain; but a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised.

Proverbs 31:30 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Agur begins by saying he doesn't know much? What does that teach about wisdom?
2. What would it look like for you to pray Agur's prayer, neither poverty nor riches?
3. Who are the voiceless people in your school or community? How could you speak up for them?
4. How is reading Proverbs 31 as a celebration different from reading it as a checklist?

TRY THIS *Think of a woman of strength in your life, like a mother, grandmother, teacher, or friend. Write her a note telling her specific ways she shows wisdom, strength, and character.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Proverbs says that wisdom is more valuable than gold, and it pictures Wisdom as being with God at creation, rejoicing in the world and delighting in humanity. Solomon, the wisest man of his time, wrote much of it. And yet Solomon himself didn't live by his own advice. He ended his life chasing wealth, power, and hundreds of wives who turned his heart away from God. Even the wisest human being couldn't live out wisdom perfectly.

Jewish readers treasure Proverbs as practical wisdom for faithful living, and some later Jewish writers connected Wisdom with God's law. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, came to see Jesus as the fullest expression of God's wisdom. Paul wrote that Christ is "the power of God and the wisdom of God," and that in Him are hidden "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Jesus said of Himself, "someone greater than Solomon is here." Where Solomon failed, Jesus succeeded. He lived the life Proverbs describes, perfectly. And the greatest act of wisdom in history looked like foolishness to the world: the cross, where Jesus died for foolish people like us. The good news is that wisdom isn't just something you have to work harder to get. It's a gift. James wrote, "if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. He wants you to live wisely and well.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all sinned.

Proverbs says there is a way that seems right but leads to death. The Bible says all of us have sinned.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus is the wisdom of God.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. The cross looked foolish to the world, but it was God's wisdom to save us.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Proverbs teaches wise living, but no one lives it perfectly. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Begin with Him.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. Wisdom begins with turning to God. You can talk to Him right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, I want to be wise, but I know I've often chosen foolishness. I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You that Jesus, the wisdom of God, lived the life I couldn't live and died the death I deserved, and that You raised Him from the dead. Forgive me, and make me Yours. Teach me to fear You, to trust You with all my heart, and not to lean on my own understanding. Give me wisdom, because You promised to give it to anyone who asks. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Proverbs has 31 chapters. Read the chapter that matches the day of the month, and you'll finish it every month.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Walk with the wise. Find an older Christian you respect, and ask them to meet with you and share what they've learned.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Proverbs says the wise keep listening and keep learning. Keep asking. Keep reading. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Proverbs is right, wisdom is calling out in the streets, inviting you in, and the fear of the LORD is where it all begins.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and don't lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

Proverbs 3:5–6 (WEB)