

# A FATHER'S GIFT

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*Lessons from Proverbs*

Kenneth B. Wingate



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST  
3 Murrayfield Road, Edinburgh EH12 6EL, UK  
P.O. Box 621, Carlisle, PA 17013, USA

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To Cathy,  
My greatest gift from the Lord:

*Many women have done excellently,  
but you surpass them all.*

To Miriam, Bryan and Catharine:

*May God give you wisdom to walk in his ways  
and the grace to live life abundantly.*

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## FOREWORD

There is a long and honourable tradition in the English-speaking world of lawyers who have distinguished themselves not only in their profession as attorneys, but in the exemplary way in which they have served their cities, states and nations with great distinction.

The southern states of what is now the United States of America have been marked by men in the legal profession who have been distinguished by their Christian character, their role in the church, their leadership in their home, and all of this grounded in their love for the ministry of God's Word and their disciplined personal reading and study of it. Their Christian faith has driven their professional lives simply because faith in Christ has been the driving force of the whole of their lives.

Kenneth Wingate belongs to this noble company. His calling is to practice law in Columbia, South Carolina. His passion is to love and serve the Lord Jesus Christ. He has done this with grace and thoroughness in the concentric spheres of his life: family, church, profession, city and state.

*A Father's Gift* gives hints of these circles of life without detailing the extent to which its author has been trusted to serve in them with distinction. It has been written, essentially, for his own family—not least for himself as a means of clarifying the responsibilities and privileges he has shared with his wife Cathy for the Christian

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nurturing of their children. It is in the truest sense a father's gift to his own family, and our privilege as readers to be able to eavesdrop on the counsel Ken has mined from the wisdom of God's Word, and especially from the book of Proverbs. The fruit of all this, as I am able to testify from personal friendship—although perhaps Miriam, Bryan, and Catharine would rather I left their names out of this foreword!—is the reproduction, by God's Word and Spirit, of Christian character—and 'characters'.

Many young parents today are beside themselves with anxieties about their children, and, sadly, confusion too about how to nurture them. The ongoing addiction of our times to the heresy of modernity ('the latest book, or guru, is likely to have it right') and its proud rejection—and ignorance—of the tested and tried wisdom of the past, inevitably leads to dysfunction in home and family life. Sadly, the older, wiser counsel of God's Word—and especially of the book of Proverbs—is unknown or neglected. Yet Proverbs was composed specifically as a manual for home and family instruction, and to prepare us for life in the world. It is a divinely given handbook to help parents. Indeed it appears to begin, as Old Testament theologian Bruce Waltke has insightfully shown, with a series of basic 'father-son' talks (easily translated into father-daughter or mother-daughter talks!). These are then followed by a miniature library of wisdom expressed in memorable—and easily memorized—ways.

Proverbs—and Ken Wingate following it—does not provide a mechanical, formalized, slot machine approach to building Christian character (do X and Y is guaranteed). Rather it shows us the way to possess the jewel of all jewels in a well-adorned life: wisdom that is rooted in the knowledge of, and reverential love for, God. 'The beginning of wisdom is this: get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight' (*Prov.* 4:7). From chapter 1 these parent-child talks point us to their fruit in manly godliness and their expression

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in the godly femininity with which the book closes in chapter 31. That is why Proverbs has proved to be worth its weight in gold in every age and culture. Ken Wingate now brings it into our needy culture, and I for one am grateful to him for sharing his gift as a father with other fathers—and mothers, and sons and daughters too.

Here then is a book for parents to read on their own; for teenagers to read on their own; for parents and teenagers, who are willing to take the family challenge, to read round the table after dinner or on other occasions. It points us to God's way. It promises us God's grace. What could be better for us than that?

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON  
First Presbyterian Church,  
Columbia,  
South Carolina

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

**I**t was Christmas morning, 1996. Our extended family—three generations of Wingates and Edwards—had gathered at the farm we call ‘Limerick’. Fifteen people, three Labrador Retrievers, and a cat scurried around the festively decorated farmhouse. A fire crackled in the fireplace. I vividly remember every detail of that cold, beautiful, noisy morning.

The children were excited, gift wrapping was flying, dogs’ tails were wagging, Christmas music was playing. But in the midst of the revelry something was missing. Somehow the nicely wrapped gifts, though beautiful, seemed a little empty. The real agenda of the day was not yet accomplished.

I went for a solitary walk in the woods, and as I walked I prayed out loud: ‘Lord, what is the best gift I can give my children for Christmas? What present will truly last?’ My immediate impression was, ‘Write them a book on life’s most important lessons.’

In the days and weeks that followed, I searched the Scriptures, asking myself what lessons a father ought to pass on to his children. I kept going back to this passage from Proverbs:

Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck (1:8-9).

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What instructions? What teaching? Thus I began sifting through and summarizing the lessons of Proverbs. What are its key principles? What words of wisdom did the father impart to his sons and daughters?

The longer I've studied, the more I am captivated by the practical wisdom of the book of Proverbs. It reveals the path to abundant life—and that is precisely the gift I want to give my children!

Twelve years and many life events later, here is the gift I've been making. It is really a personal gift for my three children, Miriam, Bryan and Catharine, but I am more than happy to share it with anyone who cares to eavesdrop on our conversation.

KEN WINGATE  
Columbia,  
South Carolina

## ABUNDANT LIFE: INTRODUCTION TO PROVERBS

*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*

(John 10:10)

**W**e all want the most out of life. But which path leads to the abundance Jesus promised?

For some people, abundance is measured in dollars. Long hours, hard work, and doing whatever it takes to get ahead becomes their path of choice. For others, attaining power, making a name for themselves, or maximizing leisure and pleasure is their goal. Perhaps many have no specific aim but just float down the river of life, hoping to avoid the rocks. Each preferred path leads to a multitude of consequences. But at the end of the day, what really satisfies the soul? How do we make the *best* choices in life?

The Bible teaches that God created us with a specific goal for our life. Finding the path that leads to that goal, and sticking to it, is what will make us truly happy. True success in life means faithfully fulfilling that purpose. And that is what Scripture is all about—it is the only trustworthy guide that will faithfully direct us along the whole of life's way. God told Joshua,

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This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success (*Josh.* 1:8).

The psalmist wrote, 'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path' (*Psa.* 119:105). But of all the books in the Bible, Proverbs supplies the most practical advice on choosing the right path.

The ancient Hebrews had a word for the ability to make the best choices in life: *wisdom*. Wisdom is much more than the possession of knowledge or intelligence—it is living life skilfully. The wise person makes the right choices, says the right words, spends time and resources on the things that matter most. The wise person is blessed—he enjoys God's presence and approval.

The wise person also has the right perspective on life—he has a bird's-eye view of the maze. It is this heavenly perspective that allows us to pick carefully our way around obstacles, avoid pitfalls, identify and then reach the right goals. Wisdom is the ability to see life as God sees it.

The book of Proverbs is a compendium of wisdom—a collection of carefully worded sayings intended to instruct the young, remind the forgetful, and warn the naïve in the ways of life. Proverbs is a road map for life. My purpose in writing this little book is to summarize some of the key principles found in the book of Proverbs. My desire is that these simple words of spiritual wisdom will become the foundation upon which my own children will build their lives. For knowing the living and true God and humbly walking through life in fellowship with him is the only lasting measure of success and the source of real satisfaction in this world.

President Theodore Roosevelt once said, 'Character, in the long run, is the decisive factor in the life of an individual and of nations alike.' Good character grows out of thousands of minute-by-minute choices that favour wisdom over folly. Sadly, our modern

culture much prefers personality to character. Personality is a divine quality, for God created us as individuals. Each one of us is a person created by God—unique in appearance, voice, fingerprints, thoughts, and opinions. But true individualism means having the freedom to serve God uniquely, not the freedom to live independently from God’s guidance or control. The Bible teaches us that mankind’s primary purpose in life is to know, honour, and enjoy the Creator. Individualism is necessary to fulfil that purpose, but it means freedom to do the right thing—not freedom to do whatever we might choose.

There are moral laws just as there are physical laws in this universe. An object dropped from a table will fall to the floor thanks to the law of gravity. Anyone who ignores the law of gravity does so at his own risk! Likewise, this universe has its moral laws. A person who ignores God’s moral laws also does so at his own risk. Disregard for God’s laws is called sin in Scripture (the Greek word for sin basically means to ‘miss the mark’, to ‘fall short of the goal’). Our culture scoffs at the concept of sin. The vast majority today believe there is no such thing as absolute right or wrong. For them right and wrong are relative concepts which depend on life’s various situations. Yet Scripture teaches that there are truths which are absolute and eternal and behavioural guidelines which have been ordained by the Creator. The wise person follows God’s instructions, but the fool disregards them and follows his own desires. The wise will find abundance, but the foolish will find emptiness. Sin—the conscious choice to depart from God’s path and to go our own way—may seem enticing, but it leads to destruction.

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### *Which Gate Marks the Path?*

Scripture sets before us two paths. The path of self-reliance leads ultimately to destruction and ruin, whereas the path of God-reliance leads to abundance. 'Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths' (*Prov.* 3:5-6). The choice of which path to follow makes all the difference in the world. 'There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death' (*14:12*).

Life's two paths—self-reliance and God-reliance—are each entered through their respective gates.

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few (*Matt.* 7:13-14).

What is the 'narrow' gate? In his parable of the sheepfold, Jesus said, 'I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture' (*John* 10:9). On another occasion he said, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (*14:6*). The 'broad' gate is easy to find because it marks the path of self-reliance. It is the easiest gate to enter because it stands at the head of the most natural path for us to choose, the wide way that never demands the sacrifice of self as one's master. Doing whatever pleases self is life's easy path, but, according to the Lord Jesus, it 'leads to destruction'.

### *Where Does the Path Begin?*

Every journey begins with a single step, and knowing the living God is the first step on the way to an abundant life. 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the

Holy One is insight' (*Prov.* 9:10). Our primary goal in life must be to live in the fear of the Lord, to know the Holy One. That is what Proverbs teaches us. Derek Kidner writes: 'a sense of purpose and calling lifts the teaching of Proverbs above the pursuit of success or tranquillity, clear of the confines of . . . dry moralism, into the realm of knowing the living God "in all (one's) ways".'<sup>1</sup> As the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* says, 'Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.' Knowledge of our Creator and the way he has ordered his world is not only the means to successful living, but knowing and enjoying him is in itself the ultimate goal.

What does Proverbs mean when it says that this enjoyable relationship begins with 'fearing the Lord'? In part the fear of the Lord means awe and respect, but it also means much more than that. It is an awareness that God is present with us, watching everything we do, say, and even think. 'For a man's ways are before the eyes of the LORD, and he ponders all his paths' (5:21). The Bible teaches clearly that God is an ever-present spirit who knows everything that happens. He is everywhere at once, and nothing escapes his attention. This is a great comfort for many and a great problem for others. 'The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good' (15:3).

For the person who submits to God's authority, the awareness of his watching eye is a great comfort. Lion cubs play happily under the watchful eye of the mighty lioness, even though danger may be lurking nearby. Her attentive presence ensures protection and peace. Likewise, no matter how dark the night or how far from home we may be, we are never alone, for 'the LORD of hosts is with us' (*Psa.* 46:7).

Awareness of God's presence also brings respect for his authority over us. This is the 'fear of the Lord' for the believer—a healthy

<sup>1</sup> Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Inter-Varsity Press, 1964), p. 21.

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balance between fearing God's discipline if we sin and respecting and enjoying his presence. A sense of God's approval grows with the awareness of his watchful eye upon us and a desire to please him. As we make progress in the way of faith the sense of his presence grows. 'But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day' (4:18). As a child of the king we have free access to the throne room of heaven. We live life daily in God's presence—respecting his authority over us, willingly obeying him and serving him with great joy.

How can we practically experience this fear of the Lord? By talking to God out loud or in the quiet recesses of the heart. By counting our blessings and thanking him for all he has done. By reflecting on his mighty deeds and his sustaining grace. By pondering the wonders and mysteries of his beautiful creation. By picturing him as a loving father who delights in the children he has redeemed at such great cost to himself. By filling our minds with Scripture, with the biographies of great believers, and with other inspirational literature. By not allowing the mindless, incessant drone of television, iPods or the Internet drown the soul's quest for fellowship with the Creator. His is the still, small voice, and it can be easily drowned out by the frantic clamour of daily life.

### *Melts in Your Heart, not in Your Head*

The New Testament sheds more light on how we find wisdom and life: 'If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you' (Rom. 8:11). It is not head knowledge (an accumulation of facts and experiences), but heart knowledge that makes us wise and gives us life. We might live as long as Methuselah yet never become wise,

because our natural, self-reliant ways of life and thought are so very different from God's ways. The Apostle Paul spent his early years studying and training his mind in the Law, but it was not until he had an encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus that the light dawned on him. A personal encounter with the living God instantly transformed and re-ordered his great store of knowledge. In later years he wrote to the church:

and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God . . . Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (*1 Cor. 2:4-14*).

Proverbs does not give us a book of rules—do's and don'ts—that if followed will win us favour with God. His mercy and favour are freely given to all who simply trust him. Along with forgiveness God also gives us his Spirit to dwell within us, and to change us from the inside out.

Our day to day character and conduct are merely external indicators of the inner condition of our soul. We cannot earn God's favour by doing good things and by acting wisely; we cannot lift ourselves up by our own boot straps. We cannot win God's favour by being the right kind of person. We must first receive God's grace in Christ Jesus which will bring us into a right relationship with God. That is the first step in the journey to abundant life. Unless we are on that path, with Christ our Saviour, we are not going to fulfil the purpose for which we were created: knowing and

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enjoying God in all our ways. The great irony is that only in losing ourselves do we find ourselves, together with life's greatest joys.

### *We Are What We Eat*

Our behaviour—what we say and do—comes from what we think. What we think is influenced largely by what we feed our minds. What we read, hear and watch has a profound effect on how we govern and direct our inner emotions and thoughts. We are what we eat!

My assumption is that the Holy Bible is exactly what it claims to be—the inspired word of the God who made us. 'For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart' (*Heb.* 4:12). Therefore, it is the only authoritative guide for life as God intends it. What is further, God gave it to us for the very purpose of instructing us in the proper use and care of our life, something akin to an owner's manual. 'All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work' (*2 Tim.* 3:16-17). The Bible is perfectly reliable and inherently profitable for training us—for guiding us along the best path of life.

The *Shorter Catechism* teaches us that the 'Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duties God requires of man.' Proverbs is not a book of the Bible that focuses primarily on theology—what we are to believe concerning God—yet it sheds light on two of God's most significant attributes. First, it teaches that God is omniscient, knowing not only our outward behaviour but also our inner thoughts and motives. 'For a man's ways are before the eyes of the LORD, and he ponders

all his paths' (5:21). Second, it teaches that God actively guides and protects us, imparting wisdom to those who seek him. 'For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk in integrity' (2:6-7).

Proverbs' focus falls primarily on the second part of the *Catechism's* answer: the 'duties God requires of man'. What does God require in terms of our attitudes and actions in daily living—the things we value, how we use our time, how we treat our friends and neighbours, how we speak to others, how well we control our appetites, how we manage our finances, etc.? Regarding these important issues Proverbs provides us with a treasure trove of practical wisdom.

To live abundantly we must be people of the Book. The habit of regular Bible reading is foundational to success and fulfilment in life. The more we read, study and memorize Scripture, the more it will shape our worldview and govern our conduct. 'Bind them on your heart always; tie them around your neck. When you walk, they will lead you; when you lie down, they will watch over you; and when you awake, they will talk with you. For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life' (6:21-23).

Let's look at some of the major issues addressed by Proverbs. My hope is that you will keep them continually in mind as you navigate your way. They will guide you into the abundant life.

*Key Principle: The 'fear of the LORD' is the first step on the path to abundant life.*