

# Introduction: Life Works God's Way

*Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice?... "Those who find me find life and receive favour from the Lord."*

(Proverbs 8:1, 35)

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Very few people ever get to pilot an F-35 fighter jet. With a top speed of 1,200 miles per hour and enough onboard weaponry to destroy a small city, it's probably just as well. Would-be pilots have to pass a gruelling set of physical, intellectual and psychological tests even to make it into flight school, and only the very best graduates are ever trusted to handle a jet as powerful as the F-35. Air force commanders know that only a fool would try to pilot an F-35 without the proper training.

Solomon grasped this principle when he visited the Tabernacle at Mount Gibeon in 970 BC. He sacrificed 1,000 burnt offerings because he knew that he was in desperate need of God's attention. The Lord responded by appearing to him that night in a dream with an incredible offer: *"Ask for whatever you want me to give you."*<sup>1</sup>

Solomon didn't hesitate. If piloting an F-35 is difficult, piloting life is even harder. It didn't matter that his father David had assured him when he named him king of Israel that *"You are a man of wisdom"*; Solomon knew that he couldn't pilot his life on his own. *"I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties,"* he pleaded. *"So give your servant a discerning*

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Kings 3:5. See also 1 Chronicles 21:29; 2 Chronicles 1:3–6.

*heart.*<sup>2</sup> Solomon had seen the smoking wreckage caused by his father's adulterous affair with his mother, and he had seen three of his older brothers wreck their own lives too by ignoring God's shouts from the control tower. Amnon had copied his father's sexual sin, Absalom had chased fame and Adonijah had lusted after power. All three of them were dead, and the new King Solomon was determined that he would not fly solo any more. "Give your servant a hearing heart," he asked God literally in Hebrew. He asked to enrol in the Lord's flight school because he had seen firsthand that life only works God's way.

The Lord was delighted with Solomon's reply. Offered carte blanche, he hadn't asked for women or worship or wealth, but for wisdom to handle the flight path of his life better than his father and his brothers. "I will do what you have asked," the Lord promised. "I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be."<sup>3</sup> 1 Kings 4:29–34 tells us that God gave him such great wisdom that he outclassed the finest teachers of the world and received visitors from every nation who shared his passion to find out how to live life God's way. It also tells us that he wrote 3,000 proverbs and over 1,000 songs to preserve his wisdom for anyone humble enough to ask God if they can enrol in his flight school too.

Although some modern scholars have questioned whether Solomon actually wrote the three Old Testament books which we know as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs, the text of the three books seems to support the almost 3,000 years of consensus among Jews and Christians that he did so. Proverbs 1:1 describes the book as "*The proverbs of Solomon son of David,*

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Kings 2:9; 3:7–9. Solomon must have only been about 18 years of age when he became king.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Kings 3:12. You can read about the smoking wreckage of David and his eldest sons' lives in 2 Samuel 11–20 and 1 Kings 1–2. You can read about the wisdom and later folly of Solomon's life in 1 Kings 1–11.

*king of Israel*".<sup>4</sup> Song of Songs 1:1 explains that it is "*Solomon's Song of Songs*", which is a Hebrew way of saying "*Solomon's Best Song*".<sup>5</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:1 and 12 describe the author as "*The Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem... king over Israel in Jerusalem*", which is something only Solomon could ever say since all subsequent kings of Jerusalem ruled over Judah but not Israel. We should therefore view these books as a description of the lessons which Solomon learned through the ups and downs of his life's flight path. We should treat them as a warning that we need help to live life God's way.

Solomon reigned for forty years from 970 to 930 BC, and during the first half of his reign he succeeded in living life God's way. 1 Kings 10:23 celebrates the fact that "*King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart.*" Not content with sharing his wisdom with visitors in his own generation, he devised a way that he could put succeeding generations of believers through God's flight school too.<sup>6</sup> He began to compile the book which we know as Proverbs, starting with lesson one in **Proverbs 1–9**, which is a call to **Learn God's Way**. He created lesson two by picking 375 of his 3,000 proverbs to form the bulk of **Proverbs 10–31** and spell out in detail what it means to **Live God's Way**.<sup>7</sup> If this longest lesson appears to jump from one theme to another, with

<sup>4</sup> His authorship is reiterated in Proverbs 10:1 and 25:1.

<sup>5</sup> This was simply the normal Hebrew way of expressing an absolute superlative. We can also see this in the way they referred to "*The Most Holy Place*" in the Tabernacle as "*The Holy of Holies*".

<sup>6</sup> Solomon may have written specifically for his eldest son and heir Rehoboam, since he repeatedly addresses Proverbs 1–9 to "*my son*". However, Proverbs 4:1 also makes it clear he had a wider readership in mind.

<sup>7</sup> Solomon's Top 375 forms the bulk of lesson two (10:1–22:16), but by no means all of it. It also includes some of Solomon's favourite wise sayings from around the world (22:17–24:34), as well as 125 more of Solomon's proverbs which were selected by King Hezekiah's wise men over two centuries later (25:1–29:27), and some of their own favourite wise sayings from around the world (30:1–31:31).

little sense of thematic grouping, it is deliberate. Life is more complicated than flying an F-35, and it defies our attempts to compartmentalize its challenges. Since love is perhaps the most complicated aspect of them all, Solomon gave us **Song of Songs** as lesson three in order to teach us how to **Love God's Way**.

Sadly, in the second half of his reign, Solomon failed to practise what he preached. The star student of God's flight school, who had proved in his twenties and thirties that life works God's way, attempted to fly solo and wrecked his life even more seriously than his father David had before him. He nosedived in his forties and fifties into the misery and despair which he describes in the book of **Ecclesiastes** and which serves as lesson four and as a warning that we need to **Keep to God's Way**. Ecclesiastes charts his discovery that life makes no sense without God at the centre, and it describes his homeward path to a recommitment of his life to the Lord and to the fact that life only works God's way.

So let's enrol together in God's flight school and go straight to the heart of the three Old Testament books which were written by Solomon. Let's allow the wisest Old Testament writer to tell us how we can learn God's way, live God's way and love God's way, just as he did. Let's heed his warnings not to deviate from God's flight path, as he did, but to keep to God's way until we reach the landing lights at the end of our life's journey.

Let's ask the God who appeared to Solomon at the Tabernacle to give us wisdom too. Let's ask him to teach us how to live life to the full in the world which he has made. Let's surrender to Solomon's ancient conclusion that life only works God's way.

# The Five Faces of a Fool (1:8–33)

*How long will you who are simple love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge?*

(Proverbs 1:22)

Solomon must have had high hopes for his eldest son Rehoboam. He gave him a name which meant *The People Have Grown Bigger*, because he knew that following in his footsteps would not be easy. Success without a successor spells failure, so Solomon started to train his crown prince early.

Some readers of Proverbs struggle to understand why the book seems to be mainly addressed to men and not women, to rulers and not subjects, to the rich and not the poor, and to the young and not the old, but this is why. Solomon makes it clear in 4:1, 5:7 and 7:24 that he has a wider readership in mind than simply Rehoboam, but he also makes it clear that his number one reader is the son who will reign after him.<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 1–9 takes the form of twelve fatherly talks, the first eleven of which begin with a passionate appeal to *“my son”*.<sup>2</sup> Other people can

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<sup>1</sup> In the broadest sense Solomon is *“giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young”* (1:4), but these verses also make it clear he has a particular simple youth in mind.

<sup>2</sup> These twelve fatherly talks are 1:8–19; 2:1–22; 3:1–20, 21–35; 4:1–9, 10–19, 20–27; 5:1–23; 6:1–19, 20–35; 7:1–27 and 8:1–9:18. In the twelfth talk, it is Wisdom rather than Solomon who speaks as parent. Rehoboam is not named so that *“my son”* can refer to anyone, but for Solomon one son mattered more than all the others.

enrol in God's flight school, but the head boy of the school is the crown prince Rehoboam.

If you have read 1 Kings 12, you will know that Solomon's high hopes for his eldest son were not to be. When he came to the throne in 930 BC, Rehoboam wore the five faces of a fool which his father warned against in these verses. Let's look together at five Hebrew words which Solomon uses to describe the different aspects of human folly. As we do so, let's commit ourselves to heed his fivefold warning more than Rehoboam did.

The first word is *'ewīl* in verse 7, and this word for fool occurs nineteen times in Proverbs. It doesn't mean someone who lacks mental ability, but rather someone who lacks moral humility. An *'ewīl* is not a good-hearted person who fails to grasp God's will with his head, but a rebellious person who refuses to submit to it with his heart.<sup>3</sup> Rehoboam was an *'ewīl* in 1 Kings 12 because he took his dilemma to his friends instead of to the Lord. While his father began his reign by visiting the Tabernacle and listening to the Lord, Rehoboam began his reign by closing his ears to God and setting out to make his own moral choices. He ignored his father's call in Proverbs 1:8-19 to listen to the Lord and not to sinful human counsellors,<sup>4</sup> and he discovered to his cost that Solomon was right to insist in verse 19 that life only works God's way.<sup>5</sup> 2 Chronicles 12:14 tells us that Rehoboam's evil deeds were not due to his ignorance, but his wilfulness: "*He did evil because he had not set his heart on seeking the Lord.*"

The second word is *pethī* in verse 22, and this word for

<sup>3</sup> Compare 1:13 with 8:18-21 to grasp the stupidity of the wicked fool. He disobeys God in the hope of getting what would have been his anyway if he had simply obeyed him.

<sup>4</sup> Rehoboam's mother appeals to him too in 1:8. She was an Ammonite foreigner named Naamah (1 Kings 14:21), but she had learned from her husband that life only works God's way.

<sup>5</sup> This theme of wicked life decisions destroying the lives of the wicked occurs repeatedly in wisdom literature. See Proverbs 26:27; 28:10; Ecclesiastes 10:8-9; Psalms 5:10; 7:15-16; 9:15-16; 57:6.

fool occurs sixteen times in Proverbs. It means a *simple* or *gullible* or *naïve* person – anyone weak-minded enough to fall for flattery and temptation. Rehoboam was a *pethī* when he ignored the voice of Wisdom calling out in the public square in Proverbs 1:20–33, and listened to the voice of his flattering friends instead. Wisdom shouted that “*the waywardness of pethī people will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them; but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm.*” Rehoboam refused to listen to her or to the ten northern tribes of Israel when they pointed out quite reasonably that his father’s fiscal and labour policies had been unfair towards them.<sup>6</sup> He listened to his friends and was flattered into acting like a macho despot. As a result, his waywardness and complacency destroyed his kingdom. The ten northern tribes broke away from his rule, and he was left with a fraction of the power which his father had bequeathed to him.

The third word is *lēts* in verse 22, and this word for fool occurs fifteen times in Proverbs. It means a *mock*er or *scoffer* and describes the person who refuses to take the truth or the advice of wise counsellors seriously.<sup>7</sup> When Solomon’s experienced counsellors pointed out to Rehoboam that his father had indeed been unfair and he could now win favour with his new subjects by reversing his father’s policy, he arrogantly scorned their advice. He might have saved his kingdom had he taken more note of these verses in Proverbs, but instead he simply proved that they were true. Verse 7 told us that the fear of the Lord is

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Kings 4:7–19 tells us that Solomon taxed the ten northern tribes of Israel but not the two southern tribes. 1 Kings 5:13–18 tells us that he treated the ten northern tribes like a conquered kingdom by using Israelites but not Judahites in his army of foreign slave labourers. Their sense of injustice was quite legitimate.

<sup>7</sup> Mockers love gushing out words as commentators rather than as players (15:2, 28). When a mocker is actually asked to play the game and make decisions, 24:7 tells us that “*he has nothing to say*”.

the beginning of knowledge, and now verse 29 responds that failure to fear the Lord is the beginning of folly and disaster.<sup>8</sup>

The fourth word is *kesil* in verse 22, and this word for fool occurs forty-eight times in Proverbs and nineteen times in Ecclesiastes. It means a *stupid person*, but again one whose deficiency is not in head capacity but in heart humility.<sup>9</sup> Rehoboam was a *kesil* in the sense that he had hundreds of his father's proverbs to warn him that a king must rule justly, yet he wilfully refused to listen. That's why Solomon warns in Proverbs 26:7 that a proverb is as useless as a lame man's legs to a *kesil* unless he submits his heart to Wisdom.<sup>10</sup>

The fifth word is *'atsel* and it does not occur until 6:6, but this word for fool occurs fourteen times in Proverbs. It means a *sluggard* or a *slacker* or a *waster* – anyone whose problem isn't a lack of mental capacity but sheer laziness. He craves the same things as the wise, but he makes excuses to put off action till tomorrow, and when he finally prises himself out of bed and leaves the house he quickly complains that the road to success is too costly for him to travel.<sup>11</sup> He never finishes what he starts and he buries his head in the sand to problems like Rehoboam in 1 Kings 12:18. Solomon warns in verse 33 that the wise always enjoy far more ease than the sluggard in the end.

So what shall we say? Did Solomon's flight school fail because its head boy failed to pilot his life God's way? Not at all. Jesus warned in Matthew 5:22 that if we write anyone off as a fool, we are party to their murder because there is time

<sup>8</sup> Proverbs 14:18 tells us that no matter how much a *pethi* inherits, he will quickly squander it through folly.

<sup>9</sup> The normal Hebrew word for a mentally deficient fool is *nabal*, but although this is a common word outside Proverbs it is only used in Proverbs 17:7, 17:21 and 30:22.

<sup>10</sup> Solomon personifies Wisdom in these verses as an Old Testament picture of Jesus the Messiah. Wisdom promises literally in verse 23 to pour out her *ruach* or *Spirit* on those who repent and turn to her. This verse corresponds to Jeremiah 33:3 as much as verse 28 states the opposite.

<sup>11</sup> See Proverbs 13:4; 15:19; 19:24; 21:25; 22:13; 26:14-16.



for a person to repent and listen to Wisdom's words. Whether we wear all five faces of a fool or just one or two, we can repent and walk a different path from the five-times foolish head boy Rehoboam.

Wisdom calls to us as we finish chapter 1, calling us fools with one breath and inviting us to become wise men and women with the next: *"Repent at my rebuke! Then I will pour out my thoughts to you, I will make known to you my teachings."*<sup>12</sup> None of us need wear the five faces of a fool like the head boy Rehoboam.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Since it is Jesus who speaks here as Wisdom personified, this verse uses the Hebrew word *rūach* and can be literally translated *"Repent at my rebuke! Then I will pour out my Spirit on you."*

<sup>13</sup> Jesus cannot be telling us never to call a person a fool, since he does so himself in Matthew 23:17 and Wisdom treats many of her listeners as fools who will reject her call in verses 24-33. He is simply warning us not to write off anyone as a fool, but to fight for each one to see sense and choose life while they still can.

# The Strongest Muscle (12:6–13:3)

*The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*

(Proverbs 12:18)

Gerald Ratner was doing so well. He had started out in the jewellery trade at the tender age of seventeen and had worked like a slave for twenty-five years to turn his Ratner's chain of jewellers into one of Britain's most successful high street retailers. Hailed as the man with the Midas touch, he now travelled between his many luxury homes by helicopter or by classic Bentley. Then he accepted an invitation to dinner.

The leading company directors of London had recognized his success by inviting him to speak at their annual luncheon at a stunning venue on the same road as Buckingham Palace. Buoyed by the occasion, he joked in his speech that he sold jewellery at such fantastic prices *"because it's total crap... It's cheaper than a Marks and Spencer prawn sandwich and it probably won't last as long."* He was smiling as he said it but nobody else was laughing. When his speech was broadcast on the evening news, shocked customers boycotted his stores and turned his lunchtime meeting into the most expensive meal in modern history. The value of the Ratner's chain of jewellers plummeted by £500 million and he was fired as its CEO. Warren Buffet later observed: *"It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently."*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ratner gave this disastrous speech in 1991, as recorded in Stephen Weir's book *History's Worst Decisions: And the People Who Made Them* (2008). This

Solomon was even smarter than Warren Buffet so he spends much of Proverbs warning us not to underestimate the massive power of the human tongue. Whatever the medical facts, the tongue is without a doubt the strongest muscle in the human body.<sup>2</sup> *"The tongue has the power of life and death,"* he warns in 18:21. *"Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity,"* he adds in 21:23. In addition to littering the whole of Proverbs with warnings for us to guard how we use our tongues, Solomon gives us an entire chapter of teaching on the power of the tongue here in 12:6 to 13:3.

First, Solomon tells us to *be honest*. He told us in 6:16-19 that the Lord detests both liars and their lying tongues, and he repeats in 12:22 that *"The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy."* To tell the truth is to be wise and righteous, and it provokes the Lord to bless us.<sup>3</sup> To tell lies is to be wicked and foolish, and it provokes the Lord to judge us. Our lies may fool people in the short term (12:19), but God will soon expose the truth (12:9) so that we become the only people fooled by our fantasies (12:11). Solomon warns us that those who set out to deceive others will ultimately deceive their own hearts (12:20) like Arthur Dimmesdale, the lying clergyman in Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic novel *The Scarlet Letter*, who mourns: *"No man can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude without finally getting bewildered as to which may be true."*<sup>4</sup> Lying will bring us misery but truthfulness will bring us joy.

Next, Solomon tells us to *be calm*. Words spoken in anger may sound clever but they are very rarely wise. *"Fools show their annoyance at once, but the prudent overlook an insult,"* he

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is also the source for Ratner's statement later in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Technically the tongue comprises eight muscles, but this doesn't alter Solomon's basic argument that the tongue can do more good or harm than any other muscle in our body.

<sup>3</sup> Although 12:17 appears quite obvious, it is actually making a vital point. If you lie, you are a liar, whatever you may argue to the contrary.

<sup>4</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

explains in 12:16, and he follows this up even more strongly in 15:1 by telling us that *“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”* However trifling an angry riposte may seem at the time, it is *“like a scorching fire”* (16:27) and acts like the spark which starts a forest fire. *“Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark,”* James 3:5–6 exclaims as part of its New Testament echo of the book of Proverbs. *“The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.”* The way we use our tongues couldn’t be more important.

That’s why Solomon tells us to *be thoughtful*. Fools blurt out words without thinking and come to ruin in 12:23 and 13:3,<sup>5</sup> but the wise set up a security perimeter between their lips and their lives by thinking before they speak.<sup>6</sup> Unlike most of the muscles in the human body, the tongue is only attached at one end, so we must fasten it at the other end to wisdom. *“The words of the reckless pierce like swords,”* Solomon warns in 12:18, and Gerald Ratner reflected thirteen years after his costly luncheon that this warning is true: *“It was a total nightmare. One day I was on top of the world, Mr. Big Shot flying on the Concorde... The next, I was a complete laughingstock. It was such a seismic event. It’s like BC – before crap and afterwards.”*

More positively, Solomon encourages us to *be expectant*. If the tongue has power to do great harm, it also has equal power to do great good. Our words can rescue the dying (12:6), make our lives fruitful (12:14; 13:2), and bring healing to the hurting (12:18). They can bring joy to the Lord (12:22), hope to the helpless (12:25) and life to a dying world (12:28). Note the

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<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew word used for *opening wide* our mouth rashly in 13:3 is only used in one other place in the Old Testament. In Ezekiel 16:25 it refers to a prostitute opening her legs wide to passers-by. This should shock us into treating foolish talk as seriously as God does.

<sup>6</sup> The fool failed to reflect between *hearing and doing* in 7:21–23, and here he fails to reflect between *thinking and speaking* too. See also 29:20.

deliberate reference in 12:14 to God using our tongues to make us little trees of life. In case we miss it, Solomon tells us more explicitly in 15:4 that *"The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life."* Careless words can be destructive but that is only half the story. The other half is a wonderful promise that God can use our tongues to change the world.

Jesus modelled the lesson of this chapter for us perfectly. The New Testament tells us that

*Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats... For, "Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech."*<sup>7</sup>

So let's not gloss over Solomon's chapter of instruction on how to use our tongues. Let's not ignore his claim that how we speak reveals whether we are truly wise or foolish, truly righteous or wicked. Let's not ignore the echo of these words in James 1:26 and 3:2 which warn that if we fail to keep our tongue in check, we may not be followers of Jesus after all, and which promise that if we can tame our tongues by Jesus' strength, we will be able to follow him in every other area too.<sup>8</sup> Let's learn from Solomon that, if wisely used, our tongues are far more valuable than all of Gerald Ratner's jewellery put together. He tells us in 25:11: *"The right word at the right time is like precious gold set in silver."*<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> 1 Peter 2:21-23; 3:10.

<sup>8</sup> James 3:9-12 also states that how we use our tongue reveals whether or not we have truly been saved. No one can tame their tongue by human strength alone, but all those who are saved by Jesus are empowered through the Holy Spirit to tame their tongue by his divine strength.

<sup>9</sup> Contemporary English Version.