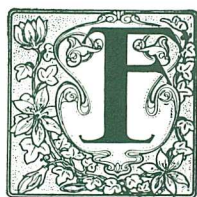
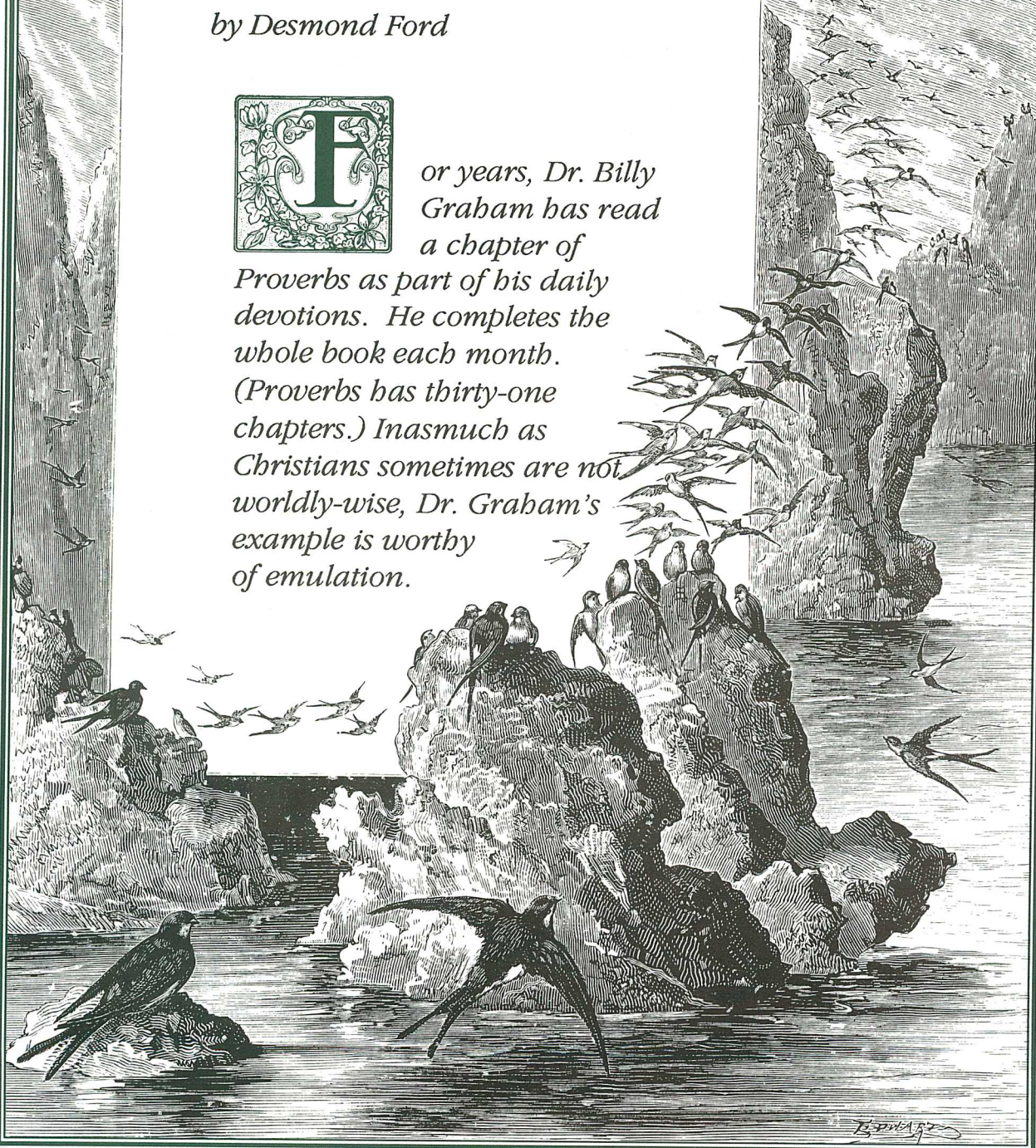


Introduction to Proverbs

by Desmond Ford



For years, Dr. Billy Graham has read a chapter of Proverbs as part of his daily devotions. He completes the whole book each month. (Proverbs has thirty-one chapters.) Inasmuch as Christians sometimes are not worldly-wise, Dr. Graham's example is worthy of emulation.



Manual of Wisdom

In Proverbs we have a manual of practical wisdom. This Old Testament book will guide us in all human relationships and pursuits. It need not be said of any one of us that we are so heavenly-minded that we are of no earthly use. It will not be said if we practice the wisdom of Proverbs.

In Scripture we have inspired priests, poets, prophets, and philosophers. That portion of the Bible known as the Wisdom literature (Job to Song of Solomon) comes from philosophers who were also men of faith. (This makes them unique among philosophers in all ages.)

What the priest affirmed to be righteous and the prophet just, the philosopher classified as prudent. Sin to the priest was a matter of defilement; to the prophet it was downright disobedience; but to the philosopher it was folly.

Proverbs Written By and For

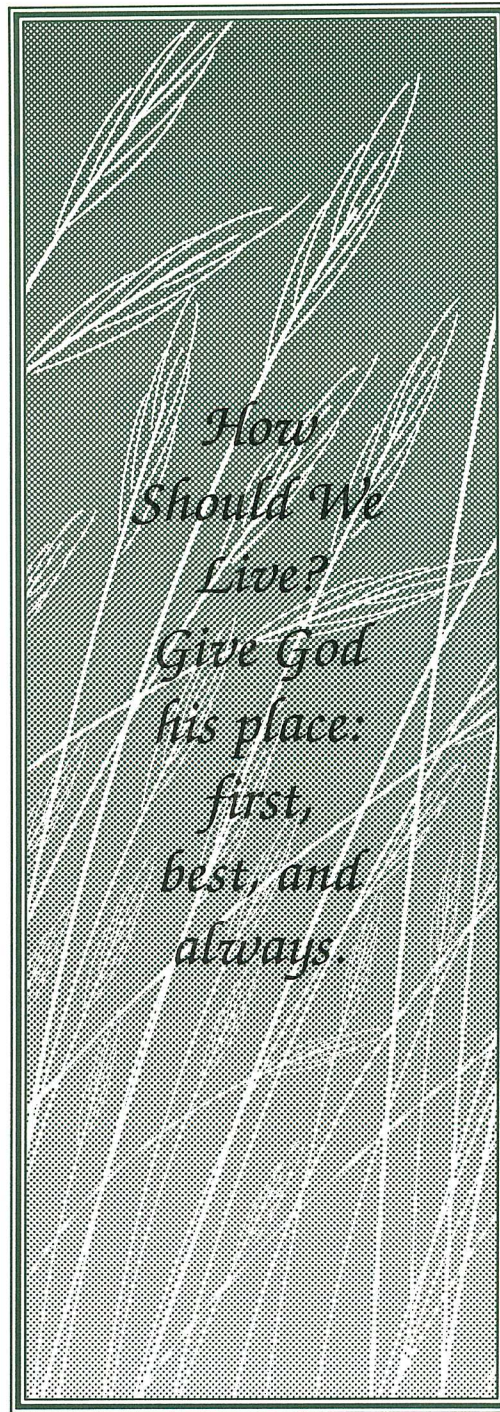
Proverbs was probably first put together in the days of Hezekiah, though many of its aphorisms had been known since the time of Solomon (25:1). Its purpose is clearly stated in the introduction: "For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity; to teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young" (1:1-4 NRSV).

In other words, this book offers an uncommon product—common sense. An old divine said it contained "Laws from Heaven for Life on Earth." But this is sure, heaven is not marred by many of the earthly situations here assumed.

One writer has summarized Proverbs' wonderful sketches of the social types of all ages and countries:

The prating fool, winking with his eye; the practical joker, as dangerous as a madman casting firebrands about; the talebearer, and the man who 'harps upon a matter,' separating chief friends; the whisperer whose words are like dainty morsels going down into the innermost parts of the belly; the backbiting tongue, drawing gloomy looks all around as surely

as the north wind brings rain; the false boaster, compared to wind and clouds without rain; the hasty to be rich; the liberal man that scattereth and yet increaseth, while others are withholding only to come to want; the speculator holding back his corn amid the curses of the people; the man of wandering life, like a restless bird; the unsocial man that separateth himself, foregoing wisdom for the sake of his own private desire; the



cheerfulness that is a continual feast.¹

All these cameos illustrate the chief point of the book, that is repeated again and again: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." It is an Old Testament way of saying: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Mt 6:33 KJV).

How should we live? Give God his place: first, last, best, and always. Life without God at the center is like a solar system without a sun.

Young People

Young people are especially addressed in this book. Usually the direction of youth is only confirmed with the passage of years. Blessed is the young person who early learns that life is a bundle of habits and that each of us is what we are because we have been doing what we have been doing. Well over ninety percent of our acts are actions of habit, no longer thought about. Therefore, the early years which shape our habits also shape, for most of us, the rest of life.

Because passion is an almost overwhelming tide in youth, the book is filled with warnings against giving way to lawless desires. Repeatedly, Proverbs rings the changes on the old saying that, "Great eaters, great drinkers, and great 'sexers' are rarely great at anything else." See particularly the seventh chapter which warns, with graphic words, the licentious male against his counterpart:

"Many has she wounded and laid low,
and her victims are without
number.

Her house is the entrance to Sheol,
leading down to the halls of death"
(Prov 7:26-27 REB).

Goodness Brings Joy

A recurring refrain of this book is the truth that, generally speaking, the pursuit of goodness makes joy more likely and more frequent. The path of sin inevitably brings pain and regret for eternity and, usually, in time.

Speaking of the glorious accompaniments of righteousness, the book declares:

Long life is in her right hand;
in her left hand are riches and

honor.

Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who lay
hold of her;
those who hold her fast are called
happy.

(Prov 3:16-18 NRSV).

Way of Transgressors Hard

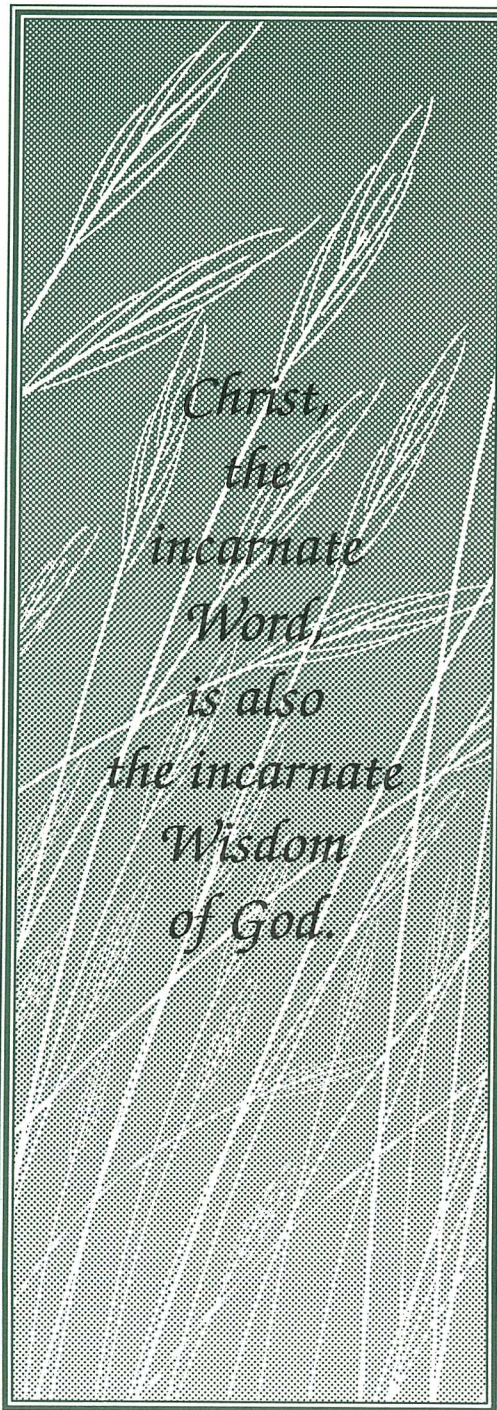
In contrast we are reminded that “the way of transgressors is hard” (Prov 13:15). Frederick William Farrar [1831-1903] was an English theologian who became dean of Canterbury, and is still referred to as Dean Farrar. [His book *Eternal Hope* of 1877 questioned the doctrine of everlasting punishment and involved him in much controversy.] He wrote a magnificent statement on the book of Romans. His comments point out that the gospel of righteousness by faith is far from being a matter of cheap grace and a license to sin. It is, in reality, the opposite.

The whole education of life is an education meant to make us give up sin. All life is meant to teach us, even if it be by the desperate teaching of evil and its consequences, that good is best. By early training, by inward calls, by the voices of father and mother, by the worship of His Church, by His Scriptures, by His sacraments, by the teaching of His ministers, by the experiences of life, by falls and recoveries, by sternness and by tender mercy, by bereavements, by sicknesses, by disappointments, by mental distress, by physical pain, by loneliness, by shame, and by success; by thwarting us, and by letting us have our own way; by not letting us have the good things of earth while we thanklessly and fruitlessly weary ourselves as in the very fire to win them, or by letting us have them and feel bitter with weariness and sick with sin, even while we possess them; by the shattering blow of the lightning of punishment, by the golden brooding of the dove of peace, He designs, from the first moment that the soul goes astray, to wean us from the fatal fascination and deadly slavery of sin, to obey and trust in Him.²

His words convey the same warning as Proverbs but with much greater pungency. The Christ event has intervened between the times of Solomon and Paul.

General Statements

Whenever one reads general counsels, commandments, or promises in Scripture, it is wise to remember that they are **general**. They are general rather than universal and without exception.



Sometimes, as if to teach this truth, we find contradictory statements in close connection. For example, we are warned not to answer a fool according to his folly lest we become like him. Immediately following comes the admonition that at times it **is** appropriate to answer a fool, “according to his folly.” This means that there are times when we can make it clear that we are not taking the fool seriously (Prov 26:4, 5).

Similarly, Proverbs 10:27 says, “The fear of the Lord prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short” (NRSV). But this is **not** universally the case. Abel’s life was brief though pious. Jonathan and Saul died together although one was a man of generous faith and life and the other an apostate.

Only the years of eternity guarantee the absolute truth and fulfillment of principles set forth in Scripture. The angel of the Lord did not encamp around John the Baptist in order to deliver him from prison. God had a much more glorious mission for the Baptist than merely long life: he was to be a sustaining source of encouragement to millions of martyrs over the centuries. Christ himself testified to John’s blessedness and fidelity, yet permitted him to die.

Always remember on every black Friday that a glorious Sunday is a-comin’—as at Calvary. God does not pay all his bills in thirty days. “The mills of God grind slowly but they grind exceeding fine.”

Christ Is Wisdom

Where is Christ in the book of Proverbs? **Wisdom** in Proverbs is the equivalent of **Word** in the first chapter of John’s Gospel. Christ, the incarnate Word, is also the incarnate Wisdom of God. Let us close with the illustrative pattern of verses given by A. M. Hodgkin [see next page].³ ❖

Footnotes

1 *The Analyzed Bible*, Vol. One, pp. 140-1.

2 F. W. Farrar, *The Messages of the Books*, pp. 285-6.

3 [I have updated the numbering.]

4 A. M. Hodgkin, *Christ in All the Scriptures*, pp. 121-3. [See overpage.]

WISDOM

Proverbs 8:23 I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was.
 8:27 When He prepared the heavens, I was there.
 When He set a compass on the face of the deep.
 When He appointed the foundations of the earth.
 8:30 Then I was by Him, I was as His Artificer.
 8:22 The Lord possessed me in the beginning of the way, before His works of old.
 8:30 I was daily His delight,
 rejoicing always before Him.
 8:14 Counsel is mine, and sound wisdom: I am understanding.
 2:4 If thou searchest for her (Wisdom) as for hid treasure.
 8:5 O ye simple, understand wisdom.
 1:20, 23 Wisdom crieth ... Turn ye at my reproof.
 1:33 Whoso hearkeneth unto me shall be quiet from fear of evil.
 8:1,4 Doth not Wisdom cry? Unto you, O men, I call.
 9:5 Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine that I have mingled.
 8:17 I love them that love me;
 and those that seek me early shall find me.
 8:35 Whoso findeth me findeth life.
 8:32 Blessed are they that keep my ways.
 8:6 Hear; for I will speak excellent things.
 8:20 I lead in the way of righteousness.

THE WORD

Jn 1:1 In the beginning was the Word.
 And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God.
 1:3 All things were made by Him; and without Him was not anything made that was made.
 Heb 1:2 His Son ... by whom also He made the worlds.
 Col 1:17 He is before all things, and by Him all things consist.
 Lk 3:22 Thou art My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.
 Jn 17:24 Thou lovedst Me before the foundation of the world.
 1 Cor 1:30 Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us Wisdom.
 Col 2:3 In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.
 Lk 10:21 Hid from the wise and prudent ... revealed unto babes.
 Mt 18:3 Except ye be converted, etc.
 Mt 11:28 Come unto Me, and I will give you rest.
 Jn 7:37 Jesus stood and cried, If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.
 Jn 6:35 I am the bread of life: he that cometh unto Me shall never hunger.
 Gal 2:20 The Son of God who loved me.
 Mt 7:7 Seek, and ye shall find.
 Jn 6:47 He that believeth on Me hath everlasting life.
 Jn 15:10 If ye keep My commandments, ye shall abide in My love.
 Lk 4:22 All wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth.
 Ps 23:3 He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness.

W H A T I S H I S S O N ' S N A M E ?

"Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended? who hath gathered the wind in His fists? who hath bound the waters in a garment? who hath established all the ends of the earth? what is His Name, and what is His Son's Name, if thou canst tell" (Proverbs 30:4).

This is a most marvellous verse. If we ask a Jew the first question, "What is His Name?" he would at once reply "Jehovah." But if we go further and say, "What is His Son's Name?" the Jew is silent, or replies: "It is blasphemy to say God has a Son." But here is a verse which at-

tributes ascension to heaven, and the creation and control of the world to God and to His Son. "And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true" (1 John 5:20).⁴ ❖