

Welcome to Explore

Being a Christian isn't a skill you learn, like carpentry or flower arranging. Nor is it a lifestyle choice, like the kind of clothes you wear, or the people you choose to hang out with. It's about having a real relationship with the living God through his Son, Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that this relationship is like a marriage.

It's important to start with this, because many Christians view the practice of daily Bible-reading as a Christian duty, or a hard discipline that is just one more thing to get done in our busy, modern lives.

But the Bible is God speaking to us: opening his mind to us on how he thinks, what he wants for us and what his plans are for the world. And most importantly, it tells us what he has done for us in sending his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. It's the way the Spirit shows Jesus to us, and changes us as we behold his glory.

The Bible is not a manual. It's a love letter. And as with any love letter, we'll want to treasure it, and make time to read and re-read it, so we know we are loved, and discover how we can please the one who loves us. Here are a few suggestions for making your daily time with God more of a joy than a burden:

☛ *Time:* Find a time when you will not be disturbed and when the cobwebs are cleared from your mind. Many people have found that the morning is the best time as it sets you up for the day. If you're not a "morning person", then last thing

at night or a mid-morning break might suit you. Whatever works for you is right for you.

☛ *Place:* Jesus says that we are not to make a great show of our religion (see *Matthew 6:5-6*), but rather, to pray with the door to our room shut. Some people plan to get to work a few minutes earlier and get their Bible out in an office or some other quiet corner.

☛ *Prayer:* Although *Explore* helps with specific prayer ideas from the passage, try to develop your own lists to pray through. Use the flap inside the back cover to help with this. And allow what you read in the Scriptures to shape what you pray for yourself, the world and others.

☛ *Share:* As the saying goes: *expression deepens impression*. So try to cultivate the habit of sharing with others what you have learned. Why not join our Facebook group to share your encouragements, questions and prayer requests? Search for *Explore: For your daily walk with God*.

And remember, *it's quality, not quantity, that counts*: better to think briefly about a single verse than to skim through pages without absorbing anything, because it's about developing your relationship with the living God. The sign that your daily time with God is real is when you start to love him more and serve him more wholeheartedly.

Tim Thornborough
Editor

When the pain hits

There's one more thing you need in order to be a good runner: training.

The word our author uses in the next section of Hebrews 12 is “discipline”—which is really the other side of the same coin. A coach may make his team run laps as a punishment or simply to build their endurance. Discipline or training, it’s all to make them better runners and better members of the team.

God’s discipline is similar. Sometimes he allows difficulties in our lives because we have done wrong things; other times it is simply to make us better runners. Whichever it is, we can trust our good Father, who knows what we need.

Read Hebrews 12:4-11

Here the author compares God to a good father disciplining his children.

- ❓ *Why should being disciplined by God actually bring us comfort (v 7-8)?*
- ❓ *What is God’s discipline like and what is the result (v 10-11)?*

The bottom line is this: don’t ignore the difficult things in your life as if they are purely random. God is in control of the universe and he is using all these things to train you and shape you. If we are attentive to our sinful tendencies and keep asking for God’s help, he will strengthen us in our faith and lead us to eternal life with him.

Read Hebrews 12:12-17

A common reaction to discipline is to give up and stop running entirely. But our

author encourages us instead to keep going. We need to stay on the track and not veer off into sin. Any injury we have will be helped only if we stay on that path (v 13).

- ❓ *What does it actually look like, practically speaking, to persevere in this way (v 14-17)?*

TIME OUT

The root of bitterness (v 15) is an allusion to Deuteronomy 29:18. It’s not talking about a feeling but a person: someone who abandons the way of the Lord and leads others astray. We need to watch out for one another so that false teachers don’t arise and harm the body of Christ.

The author ends his passage with the example of Esau, who essentially fell out of the race. He was willing to sacrifice his standing with God (his birthright) for the sake of a single meal. This pursuit of short-term pleasure had long-term consequences that could not be undone.

Apply

- ❓ *What difficult things are you enduring right now? Will you change your response to them now that you have read this passage?*
- ❓ *Who do you know who is suffering at the moment? How could you encourage them today?*



Two mountains

Throughout Hebrews, our author has been trying to persuade his audience not to run back to the ways of the old covenant but to run towards Jesus Christ.

Now he uses a new image to describe these two destinations.

Mount Sinai

Read Hebrews 12:18-21

Moses climbed Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. It is a symbol of the entire old-covenant way of relating to God.

- ❓ *How would you sum up this description?*
- ❓ *What is the source of the people's fear?*

In the story of Mount Sinai, God is distant. He is utterly holy and so people must stay away. We have seen this before: old covenant worship involved a lot of barriers, expressing the message that God is holy and people are sinful. Of course, this does not mean people were not saved under the old covenant. God arranged the system of animal sacrifices—which pointed to the coming saviour—to allow people to draw near. Even so, at Sinai, God was distant. But if you are in Christ, Sinai and the old covenant are no longer where you're running to.

Mount Zion

Read Hebrews 12:12-29

- ❓ *How would you sum up the description of the other mountain in this passage?*

Zion is a real place—the hill in Jerusalem on which God's temple was located. But this earthly city was always pointing to something more: the heavenly Jerusalem, where God

dwells. The point is that we can come to God himself in confidence because of Jesus.

TIME OUT

Read Genesis 4:8-12

- ❓ *What did Abel's blood cry out to God?*
- ❓ *Why does Jesus' blood speak "a better word" (Hebrews 12:24)?*

Unshakable

- ❓ *What does our author call us to do (v 25, 28)?*
- ❓ *What warnings does he give?*

God's voice shook the earth at Sinai. But under the new covenant there will be a greater shaking—that is, a greater judgment. One day, God will shake the whole world. All earthly kingdoms, powers and all authorities will be overthrown. Only what is done for Christ is eternal and unshakeable.

The chapter has an amazing end: "Our God is a consuming fire". It is because God is a consuming fire of holiness that his provision of a way to draw near to him is such good news. In Christ the holiness of God and the joy of being in his presence are brought together. In Christ you will not be shaken.

Pray

Spend time worshipping God in the light of what you have read.



The brass tacks

What does all the theology we have covered in the previous chapters actually look like in day-to-day life? Our author answers that question in his final chapter.

Looking out

Read Hebrews 13:1-3

Verse 1 contains the big-picture idea for how and why we look out for others. We love because in Christ we are like brothers and sisters. So, the first step to being loving is to love those in your spiritual family. This includes “strangers” (v 2)—in the original context probably Christian missionaries from other cities who needed somewhere to stay—and those who are in prison, by which the author means Christians who had been thrown into prison for their faith.

Apply

- ❓ *We often think of hospitality as just enjoyable social occasions with our friends. How would your practice of hospitality change if you saw it as being more about meeting the needs of others—regardless of whether they are already part of your social circle?*
- ❓ *What would it look like to care so much for someone who is suffering that it’s as though you are in prison with them?*
- ❓ *What motivation does our author give for this kind of care?*

TIME OUT

Verse 2 is probably a reference to angel stories in Genesis 18 and 19. But the point is not so much that we should expect angels in our homes today (though that is certainly possible) as that we just never know the

significance that our hospitality might have for the kingdom of God.

Looking in

Read Hebrews 13:4-6

The pursuit of holiness also involves looking in at ourselves. Our author focuses on two major idols that human beings struggle with: sex and money.

- ❓ *Whether you are single, dating, or married, what will it look like for you to hold marriage in honour?*

TIME OUT

The reality in verse 4 is that God will judge sexual immorality. That does not mean that there is no forgiveness for those of us who have struggled or still struggle with sexual sin. There is always forgiveness for those who repent and commit to living for Christ. Look at **1 Corinthians 6:9-11** if you need encouragement in this area.

- ❓ *Why does the author say we should stay away from love of money?*
- ❓ *In what ways can money and material things get in the way of our trust in God?*

Pray

Make Hebrews 13:6 your prayer for yourself and others today.



Follow the leader

There are over 4,000 search-and-rescue missions in US national parks every year. Many people go hiking without realising how dangerous these wildernesses can actually be.

The Christian life is not so different. We are on the way to our destination, but it is not an easy path. We can get distracted or lost or dragged off the path by false teachers. How are we going to make it through?

Read Hebrews 13:7-17

Our author brackets these verses by telling us to listen to the “wilderness guides” God has provided us with: our church leaders.

- ❓ *Why should we follow these leaders (v 7, 17)?*
- ❓ *What does following them consist of?*

Of course, we are not called to follow our leaders blindly. If they are taking you down a sinful or heretical path—that is, failing to teach the word of God—or being authoritarian or abusive—that is, failing to act like faithful shepherds keeping watch over you—then they should be avoided and exposed for the false teachers they are.

Watch out for danger

False teachings are a real danger in the Christian life, and can come from within the church as well as outside it. One way we recognise these is simply by seeing that they are “strange” or new (v 9): they are not what the church has historically taught or what the Bible says. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever” (v 8). Therefore we should not embrace radical new teachings about him.

Our author wants his readers to see one particular false teaching: the idea that what you eat is what makes you acceptable to God (v 9). This is linked to the fact that priests used to eat certain parts of the animal sacrifices from the altar (v 10). But our author points to a better sacrificial altar. The sacrifice of Jesus is the true one (v 10).

Go to Jesus

Next we hear again how Christ is the fulfilment of those Old Testament sacrifices. When a sin offering was made, the body of the animal would be burned outside the camp, as a symbol that they had been rejected by God. So, it is significant that “Jesus also suffered outside the city gate” (v 12). The location of the cross reveals that Jesus was what the animal sacrifices were pointing towards. He took on God’s displeasure and was cast out of the city, taking the place of those who should have been rejected.

Apply

- ❓ *What does the author tell us to do, therefore (v 13)?*
- ❓ *What are we to look towards (v 14)?*
- ❓ *What will it look like now in our daily lives to seek that future (v 15-16)?*
- ❓ *How can you put this into practice today?*

Signing off

Purification for sin, the blood of the covenant, eternal rest, angels, sacrifices, and a high priest like Melchizedek. The book of Hebrews has covered a lot of ground.

- ❓ *How would you finish off the letter if you were the one writing it? What would you want your readers to go away with—both in terms of the message and in the general tone and feeling?*

Read Hebrews 13:18-25

Love on display

The letter to the Hebrews is not merely a cold, doctrinal treatise. Our author genuinely loves his readers.

- ❓ *What hints are there in these verses about the kind of relationship our author has with his readers?*
- ❓ *What desire does the author express for himself?*
- ❓ *What's his desire for his readers?*

▼ Apply

- ❓ *How does this compare to the way you relate to other Christians in your church?*
- ❓ *If you are involved in teaching or leadership in any way, how could you imitate the writer to the Hebrews in the way you care for or teach others?*
- ❓ *What should your attitude be to those who are in leadership or authority over you? How could you encourage them?*

A final blessing

A number of themes from the letter are echoed in the benediction, or blessing, of verses 20-21.

- ❓ *How has reading this letter informed your understanding of the following things?*
 - *Jesus being brought again from the dead (i.e. resurrected and raised to sit beside God's throne in heaven).*
 - *The blood of the eternal covenant.*
 - *Doing God's will and pleasing him.*
 - *The glory of Jesus.*

The very last statement is a short blessing: *Grace be with all of you* (v 25). The theme of grace is a particularly fitting end to the book of Hebrews, whose message is that salvation is not earned by our efforts or merits, and certainly not through adherence to old-covenant ceremonies and rituals. Only the shed blood of the ultimate sacrifice, Jesus Christ, cleanses us. Only his blood enables us to “draw near to the throne of grace” (4:16).

▲ Pray

- ❓ *What have been the biggest challenges and the greatest sources of comfort in the book of Hebrews for you personally?*

Spend some time praying about those things and praising God for all that he has done in Jesus.



Mission control

Today and next week, we'll look at some of the big themes in Proverbs 29. As always, we will be on the lookout for one proverb that is especially appropriate to you right now.

Speech

Read Proverbs 29:5, 8, 9, 11, 20 and 22

- ❓ *Giving free reign to our anger is recommended by some psychological “experts” of today, but what do verses 11 and 22 suggest?*
- ❓ *“Flattery gets you everywhere” is a well-known modern proverb, but what does verse 5 say? (See also 28:23.)*

▼ Apply

Spend a moment re-running some of the last 72 hours—think about the conversations you have had and the attitudes you have shown to the people you have met and spoken with.

- ❓ *Is there anything that you should have done differently in light of these verses?*

Self-control

Read Proverbs 29:8, 11

- ❓ *How good do you think you are at turning away anger—at keeping yourself under control?*

Many of us think we are quite good at turning away anger but often this is not the case. We seethe inwardly and rage in our hearts. It may not have the catastrophic effect on human relationships that an outburst of anger can bring about, but it is destructive to another, far more important relationship.

TIME OUT

Read Matthew 5:21-22

- ❓ *What warnings and perspectives does the Lord Jesus bring to the question of self control?*

▼ Apply

Read Proverbs 29:18

- ❓ *What is it that will make all the difference to how we think about self-control in ourselves and in others?*

This is surely the key. If God's voice is not heard, then God's people, and the whole of society, will start to slide into the dustbin of their own sinfulness (and will call it “freedom”!). But true blessing is found in listening to God's word and living by it.

^ Pray

Ask God to help you live the blessed life of self-controlled obedience to his word today, and for opportunities to reveal it to others.

DEUTERONOMY: The best

Do you have a favourite Bible book? Perhaps Jesus likes them all equally, but if he had to choose, Deuteronomy is a real contender.

Jesus quotes from it more often than any other book. When asked for the most important command, Jesus answers from Deuteronomy. When tempted, he quotes words from Deuteronomy, not once but three times (Matthew 4:1-11). Jesus loved this book, yet today it's neglected. Let's find out what we've been missing.

A powerful speech

Read Deuteronomy 1:1-5

- ❓ *Who spoke these words and who was listening?*
- ❓ *What kind of words are they, according to verses 1, 3 and 5?*

The word "law" in verse 5 can also be translated "instruction" or "teaching" rather than merely "rules". Deuteronomy was "spoken", "proclaimed" and "expounded" to a huge crowd by their great leader. Don't think of it as a dusty rule book. This is a passionate, fiery speech that moved hearts to love God. Think of Martin Luther King's "I have a dream", or Winston Churchill's "This was their finest hour".

A momentous occasion

- ❓ *Where was this speech given (v 1, 5)?*
- ❓ *How long should it take to get there from Horeb (v 2)?*
- ❓ *How long did it actually take (v 3)?*

The Israelites were given the law at a mountain called Horeb (Sinai) and were then led by God to a wonderful land. But their hearts were not ready to love God, so they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. All that is about to change. With his dying breath Moses speaks at the edge of the land, just across the river. His speech goes like this:

- Deuteronomy 1 – 11
Motivation (reasons to love God)
- Deuteronomy 12 – 26
Legislation (ways to obey God)
- Deuteronomy 27 – 34
Exhortation (life or death outcomes)

Over the next few weeks we'll look through the first 11 chapters where Moses speaks of God's generous, undeserved love and his salvation by grace. He urges us to respond by loving God with our whole hearts and lives.

▼ Apply

Daniel Block writes this about Deuteronomy: "Its message has been largely lost to the church. This is a tragedy because few books in the Old or New Testament proclaim such a relevant word of grace and gospel to the church today."

- ❓ *How can you make it a priority to listen to Deuteronomy?*
- ❓ *What do you think you need most of at the moment: motivation, legislation (i.e. a reminder of God's standards) or exhortation?*



Why am I stuck?

Do you ever wonder why you aren't making any progress? Does your Christian journey through life sometimes go in circles?

Israel's journey from salvation to destination was fraught with setbacks. Moses knows they can't move forward until they face facts about the past, when they failed to enter the land 40 years earlier.

You all heard

Read Deuteronomy 1:6-8

- ❓ *What did God tell them when they first set out for the land?*

Read Deuteronomy 1:9-25

- ❓ *What did Moses tell them when they first arrived at the land?*
- ❓ *What did their advance party tell them after visiting the land?*

They had heard the promises of God often. They saw evidence for it with their eyes. Despite having every reason to believe, they still fail to trust God. They might be tempted to blame all this on Moses, their leader, but in verses 13-14 they are reminded that they agreed to a system of shared leadership. So, they are all accountable.

You didn't trust

Read Deuteronomy 1:26-33

- ❓ *Why did they doubt God's promises?*
- ❓ *Why should they have known better?*

This says a lot about human nature. God has given us plenty of good reasons to believe his promises. Our problem is not a lack of evidence, it is a lack of faith.

You can't enter

Read Deuteronomy 1:34-40

- ❓ *What were the consequences of their lack of faith?*

The letter to the Hebrews applies this story to Christian readers. Hearing the promises of eternal life is not enough. We won't enter the kingdom of heaven nor enjoy eternal life unless we put our faith in the promises of the gospel that we have heard.

TIME OUT

If you have time, **read Deuteronomy 1:41-46**. Notice that lack of faith can express itself in two ways. In verses 26-33 they are afraid and think they can't enter, even with God's help. In verses 41-46 they are arrogant and think they can enter, even without God's help.

Apply

"In spite of this, you did not trust in the LORD your God." (1:32)

- ❓ *How do these words speak to you?*
- ❓ *When have you failed to trust what you have so often heard?*
- ❓ *When have you failed to act out of fear and doubt? When have you gone ahead out of arrogant pride?*

Confess this to God. Give thanks that he gives us a second chance as he did for Israel.

Growing in faith

Perhaps people have said to you, “I really admire your faith”. They like the idea but struggle to manage it for themselves.

God knows how hard we find it. He teaches us faith little by little. God’s people are heading into a great fight of faith as they enter the land. Moses builds faith by reminding them of their journey so far.

God’s victories

Read Deuteronomy 2:1-12

- ❓ *How are the Israelites to treat other nations that they travel through on their way to the land God is giving them?*
- ❓ *What reason are they given to avoid a fight?*

These other nations are distant relatives, descended from the early ancestors of God’s people, from Esau and Lot. They turned their back on the Lord over time. Despite that, God gave them victories and protected their land. If God does good things for others, how much more will he do good things for his own people?

God’s victories among us

Read Deuteronomy 2:24-37

- ❓ *How does it turn out differently with the nations closer to the land?*

Moses asks politely, he is reasonable and fair, but the enemies make an unprovoked attack. God says not to worry, this is all part of his plan to give them victories and teach them faith.

If you have time, **read Deuteronomy 2:13-23**.

They experience the same things in several different places. It takes time to learn faith, they see God at work again and again over time.

God’s victories amaze us

Read Deuteronomy 3:1-11

The editor has added this footnote to Moses’ speech pointing out that later readers can still see evidence of these great victories. One of the defeated enemy kings was so dangerous, so strong and big, that his oversized bed has been kept as a museum piece. (Robert Wadlow from Illinois is the modern world’s tallest man. His bed had to be specially made too. His size 37 shoe is stored in a museum.)

Read 1 Corinthians 15:55-57

- ❓ *What victory has Christ won and how great was the enemy?*

Apply

A lifetime of knowing Jesus can gradually strengthen our faith. Take time to give thanks for victories. Ask Christian friends and family to help you remember them.

- ❓ *What victories over temptation have you seen?*
- ❓ *When have you seen unlikely people come to Jesus?*
- ❓ *What answers to prayer have surprised or encouraged you?*



Fight the good fight

Faith is not all plain sailing, it's a battle. We face great enemies like temptation, opposition and peer pressure, the deception of false ideas and, ultimately, death itself.

No wonder we are told to “Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called” (1 Timothy 6:12). Eternal life is something we are called into by God. This is a victory Jesus already won on our behalf by his death on the cross, but we do need to take hold of it for ourselves, and we do that by counting on Jesus, relying on him by faith.

Seeing the victories

Read Deuteronomy 3:12-20

- ❓ *What does Moses give to these people?*
- ❓ *What does Moses ask of them?*

Read Deuteronomy 3:21-22

- ❓ *What lesson can Joshua learn from the earlier victories?*

The land that is already won is outside the promised land. It is not the ultimate prize, but it is already theirs to enjoy. This land is the firstfruits or foretaste of what is to come, a deposit guaranteeing their inheritance (Ephesians 1:14). It encourages them to persevere in faith and fight on until the final battle is won.

- ❓ *Where do you see the work of the Holy Spirit in your life, giving you the assurance that more is to come?*

Facing the end

Read Deuteronomy 3:23-29

Moses is part of the older generation of Israelites. Because they failed to trust God and enter the land, there was a 40-year delay until the next generation was old enough. Moses will not enter the promised land. Instead, his role is to encourage and strengthen Joshua and the next generation.

- ❓ *How might Moses' attitude to the end of his life inspire those listening to his speech?*

Apply

- ❓ *If the hospital calls and it is not good news, will you believe that eternal life is at the end of it?*
- ❓ *Will you keep going through the challenges and ordeals of old age?*
- ❓ *When temptations come and you feel you are missing out for Jesus, will you trust him?*

Pray

Pray for the confidence in God to fight on in faith, to put your trust in Jesus and keep it there, whatever comes.

When Bible reading is hard

We brush our teeth, eat breakfast, and go for a run, but do we struggle to make a habit of Bible reading?

Do we say we are too busy, and then spend hours on social media watching penguins fall over? Do we remember lyrics from songs better than sentences from the Bible? Do we concentrate on long lectures, complicated recipes and detailed tax returns, but complain that the Bible is too hard? The problem is our lack of motivation. Moses has filled chapter 4 with reasons to read, with a passionate celebration of how good it is to hear God speak.

Entering life

Read Deuteronomy 4:1-4

- ❓ *What benefits come from keeping God's word?*

Entering the promised land and having life depends on knowing and responding to God's word, with nothing added or taken away. Moses reminds them of their own experience of this during their time in the wilderness in Numbers 25.

- ❓ *What happened to those who failed to keep God's word?*
- ❓ *What happened to those who held fast to it?*

In 2 Timothy 3:15 we read that the Scriptures are "able to make you wise for salvation". They teach us what we need to know to be saved from death and hell and enjoy eternal life in God's promised land. Sometimes we forget how much these words really matter.

Attracting others

Read Deuteronomy 4:5-8

- ❓ *What impact could Israel have on other nations?*
- ❓ *What would other nations say about Israel?*

Israel was always intended to be different from other nations, so that others would see how much better it is to live by God's word. Rahab, Ruth, and the Queen of the South are drawn to God's people. In Titus 2:10 we are told that Christians should live a changed life in obedience to God's word "so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive". For some of those we meet, our lives could be the only Bible they will ever read. But what a wonderful thing it would be for them to see our lives, to hear from us about the message of the Bible and then choose to read it for themselves.

Pray

Ask God to warm your heart to his word.

Ask for a greater sense of how much depends on these words.

Ask for a growing desire to live them out for the sake of others.



Where to meet God

Religion can be about meeting God through awesome architecture, beautiful buildings, moving music or silent meditation. But when we open a Bible and open our hearts, God meets with us personally.

God met them

Read Deuteronomy 4:9-11

- ❓ *How long are the Israelites to remember the day they met God?*
- ❓ *What was it like when they met him?*
- ❓ *Which words tell us that it ought to feel vivid?*

Moses reminds the Israelites of the day they met God 40 years earlier. Many of them were not alive at the time or were too young to remember, and yet God wants that day to feel as real as the day it happened for generations to come. That is what God's word will do for them, it is as if they were there.

God meets them

Read Deuteronomy 4:12-14

God did not show himself to their eyes on the day he first met Israel at Mount Sinai. They saw no form, no shape, no image of God.

- ❓ *How did God reveal himself at the time?*
- ❓ *Why is that good news for later generations who were not there?*

God showed himself by, in and through his word, and we can still hear the words he spoke. When God saved Israel and spoke a promise and gave commands, he did something that would benefit every future generation. Instead of being enslaved in Egypt, they live in the land, enjoy his promises,

and obey his word. So, in a very real sense, God met and spoke with all generations on that day.

God meets us

Read Romans 6:8

- ❓ *In what sense were we personally involved and affected on the day Jesus died on the cross and on the day he rose again?*

African American slaves in the 19th century really felt this in their famous spiritual song: *Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they nailed him to the cross? Were you there when they laid him in the tomb? Were you there when the stone was rolled away? Sometimes it causes me to tremble.* This is not just an exercise of the imagination. It is a fact. If you are a Christian, you are in Christ. You *were* there when he died, was buried and rose again. You are there with him now in heaven. And so you *will* be with him in the new creation.

Pray

Read Deuteronomy 4:11-12 again slowly, taking to heart the word "you".

Meditate on the thought that God did all this with you in mind and that he is present with you now.

Ask the Spirit to help you take it in and let it sink in until it causes you to tremble.

Family matters

We're continuing to mine the treasures of Proverbs 29, weighing each verse for its relevance to us.

Parenting

Read Proverbs 29:3, 15, 17, 19 and 21

- ❓ *How well do you think you were disciplined by your parents?*
- ❓ *What happens when a child is left to its own devices (v 15)?*
- ❓ *If you have children, does verse 17 ring true?*

The care, discipline and raising of children is a repeated theme in the book of Proverbs—it was as difficult and fraught with problems then as it is now. There are many valid styles of parenting, but at the heart of it there should be both loving discipline and a growing understanding of the Lord and his word in both parents and children. Children must learn that there is an appropriate order in God's world in which people will thrive and flourish.

Apply

Whether you have children or not, parents need constant help, encouragement and support in the raising of their children. So do offer to help, and to...

Pray

Pray for Christian parents who face the many challenges that modern life throws up for effectively disciplining their children. And pray for yourself, that you would support parents in this vital God-given role.

The secret of Proverbs

Read Proverbs 29:13, 25 and 26

Many people mistake the practical wisdom of Proverbs for simple worldly advice. But the truth which underlies it all is that God is in control. Sovereign. In charge. Over-ruling all. All-seeing. The ultimate judge. That's wonderfully reassuring for us.

- ❓ *But what is the warning in verse 1?*

TIME OUT

Read Matthew 11:28-30

We resist God's wise parenting at our own peril. And how stupidly we behave sometimes. Because Jesus' yoke is just right—even for such stiff-necked people as us.

Pray

Why not take a chunk of chapter 29, and read it verse by verse, saying a humble prayer of repentance after each proverb, asking the Lord to help you live wisely under his loving rule.



Bible blessings

Bible reading can be a joy rather than a duty when we grasp the goodness of God's word. Chapter 4 is full of its blessings. Here are a few.

Resisting temptation

Read Deuteronomy 4:15-20

❓ *What are other nations enticed into worshipping?*

God's creation was not enough to bring the nations to God. They worship God's gifts instead of the God who gave them. They idolise the things God made instead of the Maker. What a great privilege for Israel to have God save and speak to them so they need not be enticed. "But as for you" (v 20).

Avoiding sin

Read Deuteronomy 4:21-25

❓ *What impact did Israel's sin have on Moses and on God?*

God is a jealous God. His anger burns and consumes all who persist in betraying or rebelling against him. God's word warns and reminds so that we take more care over our lives.

Receiving mercy

Read Deuteronomy 4:25-31

Here is the whole story of the rest of the Old Testament in a few short paragraphs. They will enter the land, they will forget God and worship idols, they will lose the land and go into exile.

❓ *But what will happen after that? Why?*

How amazing that God knows how much we will sin before we know it ourselves, and yet his word assures us that he will forgive if we return to him.

Nothing better

Read Deuteronomy 4:32-36

❓ *How does Moses feel about hearing God's word and why?*

Don't forget what a unique privilege it is to have God speak. Don't read the Bible out of guilt; read it because it is such a blessing. Too good to miss. What could possibly be better?

Starting today

Read Deuteronomy 4:37-43

This might seem random. Moses preaches about hearing and obeying the word of God, then he carries out an unrelated task that was commanded back in Numbers 35. But that is the point. Moses has been preaching about careful obedience to God's word. So now is the perfect time for him to act on what he has just said and obey God's word. It doesn't matter which command Moses chooses to obey. It could have been any of them. The point is that he walks the walk as well as talking the talk.

❓ *What command in God's word could you act on today?*

Don't delay, now is the time to do it.



When it's hard to be good

What if you keep falling into the same trap with that character flaw or addictive bad habit? Do you set rules and targets but end up back where you started?

All we need is the right motivation. We're not saved because we obey; we obey because we're saved. We don't receive God's love by doing what he says; we do what he says because we've received God's love. That is how it was for Israel.

Know where you stand

Read Deuteronomy 4:44-49

- ❓ *Where had Israel come from?*
- ❓ *Where were they standing?*

These verses are full of place names. Israel won't obey unless they remember where they were taken from and where they now stand. God rescued them from a life of terrible oppression in Egypt, and he has already shown his generosity by giving them the land where these words were preached.

Know your Saviour

Read Deuteronomy 5:1-6

- ❓ *Who did God make the covenant with really (v 2-3)?*

By the time Moses preached, many of those at Sinai have died. By the time Deuteronomy is put together, they are ancestors. Yet the readers need to know that God makes his covenant, his binding pledge and commitment, with each of us.

- ❓ *Why do you think the Ten Commandments begin with verse 6?*

- ❓ *Why is that important?*

Apply

Read Romans 6:17

Until Jesus saves us, we are slaves to sin and unable to fix ourselves. Jesus saves us from that slavery and sets us free. He wins our hearts to obey him as our Lord. We obey Jesus not because we must but because we want to. That motivation drives real and deep change.

If a teenage boy comes to school every day with crumpled clothes and greasy hair, pity his parents. They have been nagging him for years, but he hardly uses the shower. One day he arrives with hair gel, new clothes, and a waft of deodorant. You ask yourself, "I wonder who she is?"

All he needed was the right motivation.

- ❓ *Has Jesus won over your heart to obey him fully? Has it struck you deeply that he is your saviour and your Lord?*

Ask the Spirit for help to believe it and motivation to obey.



True love

How do you treat someone when you really love them? What do your actions say about your true feelings?

Jesus sums up the law's commandments as love for God and love for neighbours in Mark 12:30-31.

Love your God

Read Deuteronomy 5:7-15

- ❓ *Why are these commands a good way to show love for God?*
- ❓ *What motives for obedience are mentioned in v 9-10, 11 and 15?*

God gets jealous, and rightly so. True love passionately demands loyalty. We may be shocked that God would punish 3 or 4 generations. But that is the number of generations who often lived together in one household. God does not punish children unless they share their parents' sins. But all too often they do. If God's jealousy lasts, then his love lasts far longer. They had no word for millions or billions. Love that lasts for thousands of generations is eternal.

- ❓ *Which of these commands are you finding hardest to obey?*

Love your neighbour

Read Deuteronomy 5:16-21

If we love God, we will also love His people. Israel is about to begin life as a community of neighbours in the promised land. They will need these commands to stay in right relationship with God and each other in the land (see 5:16.)

- ❓ *Which word is repeated for emphasis in 5:20-21? Why?*
- ❓ *How is the last command different from the others?*

The final command shows that right actions towards others require right desires in our hearts. It makes sense that Jesus sums this up as "love your neighbour as yourself". We don't treat people well because they deserve it. They may not. We love them because God loved us, saved us and made us one. We are in it together.

▼ Apply

- ❓ *Who could you treat better this week?*

TIME OUT

Read Deuteronomy 5:22-33

God gave them the big ideas, but they needed more detail. The people of Israel went back to their tents, while Moses went up the mountain to hear more. If you and I are serious about loving God and loving our neighbour, we will want to know what that means in all the details of our daily lives.

The word of God has something to say about your tax returns, that argument with your sister, medical ethics, mental health, your career and your approach to parenting, to name a few.

Let's take great care to listen and obey.

What children need most

One book title reads: *"Becoming brilliant: what science tells us about raising successful children"*. Others emphasise affection, play or mental wellbeing.

According to Moses, children need two things above all else...

... to love the Lord

Read Deuteronomy 6:1-3

- ❓ *Who needs to be taught the commands of God?*
- ❓ *Why are children and grandchildren so important?*

Moses is about to die so he hands over God's commands to Israel. Those words need passing on from one generation to the next, and the whole community of believers can help with that.

Read Deuteronomy 6:4-5

- ❓ *Why do you think the word "all" is repeated in verse 5?*

We should love God with everything we have (v 5) because he is the one and only true God (v 4). It makes no sense to divide our loyalties between God and other things that matter to us. After all, God is the only one truly worthy of our devotion.

... to hear constantly

Read Deuteronomy 6:6-9

- ❓ *Make a list of what God's commands should be "on".*
- ❓ *What is first on that list from v 6? Why?*
- ❓ *When are we to talk about God's words with children?*

God's words will never be on the hearts of our children unless they are first on our own hearts. If we love God and think as he thinks, then we will talk about his ways naturally in our everyday lives. Children will learn to love God from the things we say. The words of God need to be prominent talking points and constantly reinforced.

Apply

Some might say this sounds like brain-washing. But in Western society, children are already heavily indoctrinated into a non-Christian way of thinking. There is the constant drip, drip from social media, binge watching and a long day at secular school. It's time to pick those brains out of the gutter and wash them in something cleaner. Eat a daily meal together with a quick Bible thought and prayer. Bible stories at toddler bedtime. Chats on the walk to school or the drive to clubs. Bible discussion with teens at weekly pizza night. A Christian book with a grown-up grandson.

- ❓ *What are your responsibilities for children at home, work or church?*
- ❓ *Which Christian parents could you pray for or offer help to?*
- ❓ *What habits and routines would help your children hear the word more constantly and love the Lord more fully?*



When children grow up

When are children old enough to opt out of full-time education or urgent medical help? When would we trust them to marry or leave home?

The biggest decision they'll ever face is whether to drop their childhood faith—opting out of church and of learning from the Scriptures. Moses has urged Israel to pass their love for God on to the next generation, by constantly impressing the word of God on their children's minds and hearts. Now he explains why this matters so much.

The need to remember

Read Deuteronomy 6:10-14

- ❓ *What might Israel's children and grandchildren forget?*
- ❓ *Why might they be tempted to forget?*

Read Deuteronomy 6:15-19

- ❓ *What will happen if their children and grandchildren forget?*
- ❓ *What will happen if they don't forget?*

Israel is tempted to enjoy God's material blessings and neglect the God who gave them. They are tempted to be just like those who don't believe and to follow the same way of life and priorities. The result is that Israel will forget God and be destroyed. Children need a clear faith in Jesus that lasts through their lives so that they persevere to eternal life and are not destroyed.

Don't miss the opportunities of childhood when they want more than we give. Don't miss the opportunities of youth when they accept more of what we say than they admit. Don't miss the opportunities of adulthood

when they are influenced by us more than they realise.

The need to understand

Read Deuteronomy 6:20-25

Children like to ask questions. They want to know "why?"

- ❓ *What are children told about salvation (v 21-23)?*
- ❓ *What are they told about the evidence for God (v 22)?*
- ❓ *What are they told about motives to obey (v 24-25)?*

Moses does not recommend telling a child to be quiet and do as they are told without question. Instead he asks the Israelites to explain their salvation, to give reasons for believing and to describe God's signs and wonders (see Acts 2:22). Parents are to paint an attractive picture of life with God and show how good it is to love and obey him.

▼ Apply

Think about what helps you to believe in Jesus and what makes you want to love and obey him. How well do children understand your own motivations to trust God?

- ❓ *How can you encourage the children in your life to ask questions?*
- ❓ *How you be better prepared to answer their questions?*

Endorsing genocide?

Did God command ethnic cleansing? This thought is so disturbing that some reject the Bible while others wrestle with doubts. Perhaps that's you?

Read Deuteronomy 7:1-2

Jesus teaches us to make peace and to love enemies, yet he treats Deuteronomy as the very words of God. How can that be? Here are a few thoughts to ponder.

Read Deuteronomy 20:10-15

It was never to be repeated. In any *other* conflict Israel were told to pursue peace and preserve lives. Those who have carried out “holy wars” in Christ’s name were disobeying the Bible.

It was God’s justice. Israel didn’t decide to steal land and get in a fight. This is God administering his justice. God didn’t start the war, humanity did, rebelling against him since creation. We have no right to start wars or take lives, but God has every right to take back what he gave.

Read Deuteronomy 9:5

It was well deserved. This was not a war where innocent people happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. They had a long history of violence. Child sacrifice and prostitution were at the heart of their religion.

There was time to repent. God spoke about this, 400 years in advance, in Genesis 15. There was time to turn back to God, as Rahab did in Joshua 2.

Read Deuteronomy 7:26

It was not racially motivated. When Jewish people shared in the same sins, they faced

the same judgment. When non-Jewish people believed, they were saved. Rahab is even named in Jesus’ family tree (Matthew 1:5).

It revealed salvation. God has promised to get rid of all rebellion against him at the end of history, while those who receive forgiveness inherit the earth. God brought this about in advance as a worked example at one time and in one place. The people of that land were facing judgment sooner or later. Bringing it about in advance is a great help to others. It means that the reality of judgment and the opportunity to be saved has been revealed all round the world and through history.

Apply

If this is right, then God must take sin much more seriously than we do. We find it hard to accept, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that God is wrong.

Why not take the opportunity to discuss this question today with someone.

Pray

Pray for humility and wisdom to keep grappling with uncomfortable teaching in the Bible.



Who knows?

The end of the Proverbs changes pace. The last two chapters collect sayings, not of Solomon but of Agur (chapter 30) and Lemuel and his mother (chapter 31).

Who knows?

Read Proverbs 30:1-4

- ❓ *What is Agur acknowledging here?*
- ❓ *Why is this kind of humility truly wise?*
- ❓ *What is the answer to the series of questions he poses in verse 4?*

Our culture thinks that muscles, money, good looks, libido, self-confidence, intelligence and ability are what makes someone into a truly outstanding person. Agur wants to share a very different truth: only an admission that we know nothing can lead to true wisdom.

He talks with humility about knowing God. He rightly says that God is hidden from his creation (v 4a). But his next challenge is filled with irony (v 4b). Each of his rhetorical questions assumes that no one knows. But we have the privilege of knowing the answer. Jesus is his name. He is the one who gathers the wind in his fists (Mark 4:35-41). He is the one who established all the ends of the earth (Colossians 1:15-17). What was a mystery to Agur is made plain to us.

^ Pray

Praise God for the privilege we have of knowing the truth about the things that Old Testament believers could only guess at! To us has been revealed the truth about things that even angels were not privileged to know (1 Peter 1:12).

We know

Read Proverbs 30:5-6

- ❓ *What do these verses tell us about God's word?*
- ❓ *What should this knowledge make us do?*
- ❓ *What should it make us not do?*

Notice the practical outcome of these truths. It's not just that it's important to get our understanding and teaching right for the sake of accuracy, but because God's word is intimately connected with him. When we believe his word, we believe *him* and God promises to protect us. If we add to his word, we are misrepresenting *him*, and he will rebuke us.

▾ Apply

- ❓ *How can we treat God's word carelessly?*
 - *in our own reading and thinking?*
 - *in our church life?*
 - *as we speak with those who are not yet Christian?*

▴ Pray

God will bless or curse us depending on our attitude to his word. It's as serious as that. Read Revelation 22:18-19 and pray about your response.

Dare to be different

Even a dead fish can swim with the flow of the river, carried along by the current. It takes a living fish to go against the flow.

In the ancient world a victorious army kept valuable items from the temples of defeated nations, and took survivors to work for them, or as lovers. But Moses tells Israel to get rid of all temptation. The danger is that families will merge, values will blend. Israel will lose their distinctiveness and become just as bad. If they live the same way, they face the same judgment from God in the end.

Different relationships

Read Deuteronomy 7:1-4

- ❓ *What are the Israelites told to do when the victory is won?*
- ❓ *What will happen to their children if they intermarry?*

It is so hard to say “no” to a romantic relationship when an opportunity comes and the feeling is mutual, but Moses warns us that the risks are just too high. What matters in life is to love God and live for ever with him. Don't take any chances with that.

TIME OUT

The problem here is marriage between different religions, not different ethnic groups. Rahab and Ruth married into Israel and became Jesus' ancestors, so Jesus had a mixed heritage. Scripture has no justification for racism of any kind.

This passage is addressed to parents about their children's potential relationships. The

Bible takes a totally different tone towards those who are already married to unbelievers. God backs marriages 100% whether it was the best decision at the time or even if it wasn't. He urges you to pray and win them to Jesus by being the best spouse you can be (see 1 Peter 3:1-2).

- ❓ *What advice would you give a new Christian about dating, if asked?*

Different religion

Read Deuteronomy 7:5-6

- ❓ *What were they to do with religious objects left behind in the land?*
- ❓ *Why do you think they were told to be so thorough?*
- ❓ *Why were they to be different from other nations?*

Apply

Read 1 Peter 2:9-12

- ❓ *How do Peter's words for Christians resemble Moses' words for Israel?*

What a privilege to be a treasured possession. Perhaps you remember that childhood teddy that you couldn't bear to be parted from. God treasures us deeply, don't break his heart. Is there something that needs dealing with decisively and removing from your life? Pray for the courage to make a clean break with anything that tempts you away from God.



Why live differently?

Living among those who don't love God is like passive smoking. Their bad habits are killing them and could kill us too if we spend too much time with them.

Moses urged Israel to separate themselves from others, no matter what the cost. Now he shows why that is worth doing.

God's love promises greater blessings

Read Deuteronomy 7:7-11

- ❓ *What was Israel like before God blessed them?*
- ❓ *What has God already done to bless them?*

God is a loving, faithful God they can count on. God promised to love them for a thousand generations in the land. We are not getting a bad deal when we give something up for Jesus. He gives us more than we ask or imagine, far more than we deserve.

Read Deuteronomy 7:12-16

- ❓ *How does Israel's future compare to that of those who don't know God?*

Our temptations seem attractive, but offer so little, compared to enjoying God for ever with his people.

Have you ever taken children on holiday? You stop at a service station, and it is hard to get them back in the car. You tell them the holiday will be so much better with beaches and ice creams, but they want to stay at the service station. It has one of those little toy rides. You put a pound in and it moves a few inches.

God's judgment has greater power

The world's wrong ways of thinking and living seem so powerful and persuasive, it's hard to imagine they will ever be gone, but God will do away with all of it in the end.

Read Deuteronomy 7:17-24

- ❓ *What was Israel thinking about other nations?*
- ❓ *What can they learn from God's dealings with Egypt in their past?*

Read Deuteronomy 7:25-26

The gold and silver dedicated to their false gods must have looked attractive. Today it would fetch a high price at auction and be gazed at in museums.

- ❓ *How did it look to God?*

God is so pure that he passionately hates evil. He has set it apart for judgment and plans to remove it completely. We need to have the same attitude; we mustn't love what he hates.

Apply

Read Hebrews 12:1

- ❓ *What do you see in the lives of non-Christians that you envy?*
- ❓ *What decisive steps could you take to be rid of temptation?*

Does God promise riches?

So often we pray to pass exams, to get a job or a new client or a nice home, or for a fast recovery from illness. Today's reading offers a different perspective.

Yes, God wants us to enjoy eternal prosperity in the new creation. We will be rich beyond our wildest dreams and best of all, we will be with God. But the only way to get there is by trusting Christ. We need to learn faith first.

Times of need

Read Deuteronomy 8:1-5

- ❓ *What was it like on their journey through the wilderness?*
- ❓ *What was God's purpose, according to verse 2?*
- ❓ *What attitude was God teaching in verse 3?*
- ❓ *How is this like the way a father loves his son in verse 5?*

You would never learn to eat vegetables if your parents let you have ice cream instead. There are times when a parent has to say, "not yet". God's aim is "so that you may live" (verse 1).

"Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (verse 3). We need life-giving words from God more than money. We need a steady church more than a steady job. Better to miss a meal than miss time with God.

- ❓ *How does that reflect your own priorities?*
- ❓ *When has God humbled you or taught you to rely on him?*

Times of plenty

Read Deuteronomy 8:6-9

- ❓ *What will it be like in the promised land?*

Their mouths are watering. After 40 years of "smart price" beans on toast, Moses is reading from the *a la carte* menu.

Read Deuteronomy 8:10-20

- ❓ *What is the right response to times of plenty (v 10)?*
- ❓ *What is the danger when life is comfortable (v 14, 17)?*
- ❓ *Why should God get the credit when we earn wealth (v 18)?*
- ❓ *What is the outcome if they forget God (v 19)?*

Jesus said it is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich person to enter heaven (Mark 10:24-25).

Apply

Read Matthew 4:1-4

- ❓ *What are the parallels to Deuteronomy 8?*

Israel's time in the wilderness was a test to know what was in their hearts (Deuteronomy 8:2). God knew their hearts, but we need to know the truth about ours. Humanity fails every time, only Jesus passes the test.

Pray for the Spirit of Christ, for his humble and obedient faith, and pray for protection from the dangers of wealth.



Are Christians arrogant?

A journalist wrote that Christian beliefs are “spiritual narcissism”. He struggles to be friends with Christians because they believe Jesus is the only way to eternal life.

If Christians think they are the only ones clever enough or deserving enough for God, that is deeply arrogant. But true Christianity is much more humbling: read **Titus 3:5**.

Not arrogant

Read Deuteronomy 9:1-3

- ❓ *How do the enemies in the promised land compare to Israel (v 1-2)?*
- ❓ *How will those enemies fare in the battle against God (v 3)?*

The land is occupied by enemies as strong as Thanos; their cities are built like Fort Knox. Israel stands no chance but they are nothing to God. God takes all the credit.

Read Deuteronomy 9:4-5

- ❓ *What are they not to think?*
- ❓ *How many times does Moses repeat that point for emphasis?*
- ❓ *What does Moses say about the nations they will defeat?*
- ❓ *What does Moses say about God and his promises?*

The real reason that God takes people into his eternal kingdom is nothing to do with our goodness, and everything to do with his love. If people say Christians are arrogant, that might be a mix-up about the Christian message. God saves us because of his good promises, not because we are any more deserving. He takes all the credit, and we take

none. There is no room for moral superiority or intellectual arrogance in any believer.

Too arrogant

Read Deuteronomy 9:6

- ❓ *How can they be sure that God is not giving them the land because they are good people and have done well?*

Like a dumb animal in the ancient world that pulls heavy farm equipment with its neck, they have a stiff neck. There is no stopping them. They keep on going and going in the same direction no matter how wrong they are. They are stubborn in their rebellion.

Perhaps the reason that people say Christians are arrogant, is because sometimes we *are* arrogant. There is no smoke without fire. Perhaps they sense it from our tone of voice and turn of phrase.

Think back to recent conversations with or about those who are not followers of Jesus. Might there have been something in your tone of voice or choice of words that gave you away? Did they find you a little smug, patronising, condescending, or superior?

Pray

Ask for God's help to be humbled by Deuteronomy 7:6.

He saved us

Do we think of ourselves as basically good people, as if God got a good bargain and is lucky to have us on his team?

We must never forget the lesson in Titus 3:5 that we thought about yesterday. Salvation is something he does *for us*, not something we do for him. The Bible gives us that in a pithy saying, but also shows us what it means in the lived experience of Israel.

Not because of us

Read Deuteronomy 9:7

- ❓ *How long have the people been making God angry?*

Read Deuteronomy 9:11-16

- ❓ *How soon do they break the covenant they receive from God?*

They might have been tempted to excuse that famous golden calf rebellion as a one-off lapse that was out of character. So, Moses piles on some more examples to show that this is a pattern.

Read Deuteronomy 9:22-24

- ❓ *How many examples does Moses mention?*
- ❓ *How does he show them their true character?*

God didn't say, *Wow, what a great person you have been—look at all those people you have helped. I'll give you what you deserve: a place in heaven.* No: God said, *Wow, what a terrible person you have been—look at all those people you have hurt. I'll spare you what you deserve: a place in hell.*

Only because of him

Moses takes us back to the story of the golden calf. God was angry with the people; they deserved to be destroyed. They broke the covenant, so Moses had smashed the tablets on which it was written.

Read Deuteronomy 9:25-29

- ❓ *What is said here about God's character and promises?*
- ❓ *On what grounds does Moses ask God to show Israel mercy?*

Read Deuteronomy 10:1-2 and 10-11

- ❓ *How did God respond to Moses' request for mercy?*

The covenant is written out again as if they had never sinned. It is kept safe in a wooden box that they keep in their tabernacle and have carried with them on their journey. They still have them now as they listen to Moses preach. Throughout their journey, they kept on sinning, but God kept on forgiving, His mercy persists.

Pray

Pray that you might be honest and recognise your deep and persistent ingrained sinfulness, and be moved afresh by God's character, his persistent and patient mercy and love.

Bucket list

Do you have a bucket list—a wish-list of things to do and places to visit before you die? Agur shares his personal bucket list today, but it is filled with unexpected items.

Your list

Read Proverbs 30:7 only

- ❓ *Before you read verses 8 and 9, write down what two things you would ask of God before you died. Be honest.*

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Read Proverbs 30:8-9

Truthfulness

- ❓ *What's the first thing Agur asks for?*
- ❓ *How does this follow on from v 5-6?*

In guarding our hearts, we often need to look for the “sin behind the sin”. Often the reason that we lie (or exaggerate) is to impress others (I did this!), or to escape from our responsibilities (I didn't do that!). Both are motivated by a false love of ourselves.

Pray

Ask the Lord to help you love and fear him, not yourself or others, so that you would be more truthful. Pray the words of Psalm 51:6.

Cash values

- ❓ *What is Agur's second request?*
- ❓ *What is the big problem with riches?*
- ❓ *And what is the problem with poverty?*
- ❓ *What do these questions show about his real priorities in life?*

Wealth and poverty are running themes in Proverbs. There are countless verses showing the dangers and responsibilities of those whom God has blessed with riches. And there are many proverbs about the dangers and blessings of poverty. But the truth is that most of us would count ourselves as somewhere in the middle: neither rich nor poor. These verses speak loudly to us.

Apply

Who wants to be a millionaire? *We do!* It is assumed in our culture that we would be mad to turn down riches, and yet rejecting wealth should be the attitude of every Christian person. Not because riches are bad in and of themselves, but because we ought to measure all things by their potential impact on our relationship with God. In fact, for some of us, a dose of poverty may drive us closer to God.

- ❓ *How do you think you would react to riches or poverty? Would they improve or destroy your godliness?*

The Christian attitude, in contrast with the grasping of the world, is contentment.

Pray

Read and pray about your response to Philippians 4:11-12, Hebrews 13:5 and 1 Timothy 6:8.

Humble

Following on from Agur's humble admission in Proverbs 30:1-9 that much of life is unsearchable, the rest of the chapter seems to be a jumble of unconnected proverbs.

But there is a powerful connection between them.

Humility

Read Proverbs 30:10-14

- ❓ *What are some of the themes about prideful arrogance that Agur brings out?*
- ❓ *Which of the many warnings here strike home to you in particular? Why?*

One sure sign that we lack wisdom is that we are deceive ourselves about ourselves:

- **Socially (v 11):** Our proper place is to honour, respect and obey our parents. To curse our parents shows not that *they* lack anything, but rather that *we* lack wisdom.
- **Spiritually (v 12):** We live in self-deception about the state of our souls— thinking that we are justified—when in truth our attempts to be righteous are but filthy rags, and we are desperately in need of forgiveness.
- **Morally (v 12-13):** There are those who think of themselves so highly that they feel justified in using and abusing others for their own gain. The truly wise person knows that they are no better than others, and that they must love and care for them.

Insatiable hunger

Read Proverbs 30:15-17

- ❓ *What is Agur warning against here?*

- ❓ *What powerful pictures does he paint to push home his point?*

The writer sees clearly how foolish, selfish sinfulness spreads uncontrollably. Once people have given in to greed, which itself is a product of the self-obsessed thought that “my desires are there to be satisfied”, there is simply no stopping it. Like a pair of leeches that continually suck blood; like a dry land soaking up water; like a raging forest fire; like the constant pain of the childless couple; and, most poignantly, the open jaws of death, greed will never give in. And as verse 17 indicates, this is no superficial matter...

Apply

- ❓ *In what area are you most likely to give in to greed?*
- ❓ *Are you guilty of any of these attitudes?*

Ask God to give you a true view of yourself, that leads to right relationships and God-honouring attitudes. Pray for:

- teenagers in your church who struggle with honouring and obeying their parents.
- friends whose self-delusion about their sinfulness keeps them away from forgiveness in Christ.
- those you know who lack love for others.

Pray that God's Spirit would reveal the truth to them and lead them to repent.

What God really wants

Religious people perform rituals. Non-religious people try their best to be good people, but what does God really want from us?

Read Deuteronomy 10:12-13 and 11:1

❓ *What is the one thing that God wants from us more than anything?*

God does not want empty words of love with no obedience, nor does he want empty acts of obedience with no love. What matters is our hearts, to love him with all we have. Moses inspires Israel to love God by preaching passionately about God's love for Israel.

All the world is his and yet he loves us

Read Deuteronomy 10:14-15

❓ *Why is it surprising that God loves Israel?*

There are at least 100 billion vast and powerful stars just in our own galaxy, and 200 billion galaxies we can detect. It all belongs to God, yet he set his affection on tiny little us. How should we respond?

Read Deuteronomy 10:16

Circumcision was their outward ritual of initiation, the equivalent of baptism as a mark of membership. What more did God want?

All power is his and yet he loves us

Read Deuteronomy 10:17-19

❓ *Which words and phrases describe God's power (v 17)?*

❓ *What is his attitude to the weak and vulnerable (v 18)?*

❓ *How has he shown that same attitude to Israel (v 19)?*

God loved them when they were slaves and had no power to look after themselves. God did the same for Christians, rescuing us from slavery to sin and death, when we were powerless to help ourselves. His love for us moves us to love and obey him.

❓ *How could you defend the weak and vulnerable in today's world?*

All praise is his and yet he loves us

Read Deuteronomy 10:20-22

In the ancient world, if you wanted to convince someone that you would keep a promise, you would do some name dropping. It's a bit like getting your rich uncle to act as a guarantor for your rent. No name is so great as the name of the Lord God. Swear your oaths in his name and praise him above all others.

❓ *How do they know that God is a big name to praise (v 21)?*

❓ *How has God turned things around for little Israel (v 22)?*

Read 1 John 1:14 and ask Jesus for a heart that longs to obey him, fully devoted to him in all things. He loves to hear that prayer.

How can I be sure?

It's not enough to hope for the best when it comes to eternal life. Some things are too important so it's worth making sure.

Read John 15:9-10

Jesus died for us so we can be forgiven and enjoy God for ever. But Jesus also urges his followers of the need to remain in his love, and to express that love by seeking to obey him in all things. It can be helpful to look back and then to look ahead.

All that he did in the past

Read Deuteronomy 11:2-7

- ❓ *What are some of the dramatic things God did for Israel?*
- ❓ *What would it feel like to experience them first-hand?*
- ❓ *Who saw it happen and who didn't see it happen?*

Moses urges the witnesses to pass on what they have seen with their own eyes. The great salvation events of the Old Testament were one-off interventions in history that were not repeated for every generation of Israelites. They would need to look back and remember what others had seen and heard.

The same is true for us today. God has done even greater miracles of salvation through Jesus. There is a greater exodus, a final Passover, a parting not just of the Red Sea but of the gates of death and hell. We weren't there to see Jesus rise from the dead, but many reliable witnesses were, and their accounts were recorded in the New Testament.

- ❓ *How familiar are you with the evidence for Jesus?*
- ❓ *How could you remind yourself of reasons to believe?*
- ❓ *How could you share some of that evidence today?*

All that he promises for the future

Read Deuteronomy 11:8-12

- ❓ *What could they look forward to in the land?*
- ❓ *What was their experience of farming the land when they were slaves in Egypt?*
- ❓ *How will their experience be different in the new land?*

Egypt was dry and only produced crops when irrigated from the Nile river. Israel was more naturally fertile because of the rain and streams. In Egypt they had worked as slaves for the benefit of their masters. In Israel, their new master provides for them freely. We look forward to the free gift of eternal life, after a life of slaving away in this fallen world.

Pray

Give thanks for all that God did in Christ, and all that he promises in the new creation. Pray for his help to remain in Christ's love today and every day.



Decisions, decisions

We invest in big decisions. The recent campaigns for US president cost US\$14 billion. Negotiating the Brexit withdrawal deal took longer than building the Eiffel Tower.

Yet no decision is as important as the choice we make about whether to love God and stick with Jesus.

A decision for the heart

Read Deuteronomy 11:13-17

- ❓ *How does Moses sum up all the commands of the law (v 13)?*
- ❓ *What will happen to the rain and the land if they love God (v 14-15)?*
- ❓ *What will happen if they love something else instead (v 16-17)?*

Read Deuteronomy 11:18-21

- ❓ *Where should they fix the words of God?*

At parents' evenings, teachers tell you to make the most of learning opportunities. If you are shopping, get children to pay and talk about the sums. Take revision flash cards on long journeys. If we can do it for biology and French vocabulary, we can do it for God.

- ❓ *What can you do to get God's words deeper into your thoughts and feelings, for yourself and your household?*

A decision that's for ever

Read Deuteronomy 11:21-25

- ❓ *How long could they potentially live in the promised land?*
- ❓ *How much of the land could become theirs?*

God led them to a good land and wanted them to enjoy it all for ever. Jesus leads us into a kingdom that extends to all of creation for all eternity. So, love for God is all important.

A decision for today

Read Deuteronomy 11:26-32

- ❓ *What two options did Moses set before them (v 26-28)?*
- ❓ *Why was that a big day for God's people (v 31-32)?*

Blessing is the Bible word for God's approval, love and kindness expressed in his generous provision. God blessed humanity at creation but then cursed the land when humanity rebelled against him in Genesis 3:17. Curse is a Bible word for God's just judgment on humanity expressed in God removing his provision.

Read Galatians 3:13-14

The choice that faces us is even bigger. God sets it before us today and every day. Will we rely on Jesus who took the curse we deserve on himself on the cross, so that we receive the blessing of God in the new creation for ever? There is no bigger decision.

Pray

Pray for yourself and your household to love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and to choose Jesus each and every day.