

Voices captures the inner dialogue in our heads and hearts that distract and deceive us, seeking to allure us away from Jesus. *Voices* winsomely offers life and freedom from Proverbs, helping us to see how God's wise voice is warning and inviting us to come to Him, where true joy and everlasting love is experienced. *Voices* is a powerful discipleship resource to equip everyone in the church.

Robert Cheong

Pastor of Care, Midtown, Sojourn Community Church, Louisville,
Kentucky

Here's a book jam-packed with practical, biblical wisdom, brought right down to every day life in an easy-to-read style. The passion behind this series is that too many resources for growing Christians are parked in the wrong places: they don't deal with the pressures and fun of normal life. Andy has shone a spotlight on the life-changing truths of the book of Proverbs, made sense of them in the overall bible story, connected them to Jesus at the centre, and then parked them right where you live. Read it on your own, or with a friend or two, and you'll learn how to hear God's voice, today.

Chris Green

Vicar, St James Muswell Hill, London

Author of Assemble the People Before Me: The Message of the Church



VOICES

WHO AM I LISTENING TO?

ANDY PRIME

CHRISTIAN
FOCUS

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PREFACE

My name's Andy Prime and I'm part of a team planting a church on a housing scheme in Edinburgh, Scotland. A scheme is what we call a socially disadvantaged and deprived neighbourhood in Scotland. Planting is hard work anywhere. But one of our struggles is that there are very few resources written for and applied to our context. There's not much out there for a new Christian from a community like mine to help them grow to maturity in Christ. The aim of this book is to help you hear the voice of your Heavenly Father amid the countless other voices demanding your attention. It aims to convince you that His voice is not just worth listening to, but that He is worthy of your love and your life. My hope is that this book will not only be useful for the new Christians from my community, but for those in similar communities around the world.

ANDY PRIME
Gracemount, Edinburgh

INTRODUCTION

The First Steps series will help equip those from an unchurched background take the first steps in following Jesus. We call this the 'pathway to service' as we believe that every Christian should be equipped to be of service to Christ and His church no matter your background or life experience.

If you are a church leader doing ministry in hard places, use these books as a tool to help grow those who are unfamiliar with the teachings of Jesus into new disciples. These books will equip them to grow in character, knowledge and action.

Or if you yourself are new to the Christian faith, still struggling to make sense of what a Christian is, or what the Bible actually says, then this is an easy to understand guide as you take your first steps as a follower of Jesus.

There are many ways to use these books.

- They could be used by an individual who simply reads through the content and works through the questions on their own.
- They could be used in a one-to-one setting, where two people read through the material before they meet and then discuss the questions together.
- They could be used in a group setting where a leader presents the material as a talk, stopping for group discussion throughout.

Your setting will determine how you best use this resource.

A USER'S KEY:

As you work through the studies you will come across the following symbols...



GARY'S STORY – At the start of each chapter you'll meet Gary and hear something about his story and what's been going on in his life. We want you to take what we've been learning from the Bible and work out what difference it would make in Gary's life. So whenever you see this symbol you'll hear some more about Gary's story.



ILLUSTRATION – Through real life examples and scenarios, these sections help us to understand the point that's being made.

STOP – When we hit an important or hard point we'll ask you to stop and spend some time thinking or chatting through what we've just learnt. This might be answering some questions, or it might be hearing more of Gary's story.



KEY VERSE – The Bible is God's word to us, and therefore it is the final word to us on everything we are to believe and how we are to behave. Therefore we want to read the Bible first, and we want to read it carefully. So whenever you see this symbol you are to read or listen to the Bible passage three times. If the person you're reading the Bible with feels comfortable, get them to read it at least once.



MEMORY VERSE – At the end of some chapters we'll suggest a Bible verse for memorisation. We have found Bible memorisation to be really effective in our context. The verse (or verses) will be directly related to what we've covered in the chapter.



SUMMARY – Also, at the end of each chapter we've included a short summary of the content of that chapter. If you're working your way through the book with another person, this might be useful to revisit when picking up from a previous week.

MEET GARY

THE EARLY YEARS

Gary has always been one of the lads. Growing up on a notorious housing estate in England's northern town of Sunderland, his mother left home when he was just a toddler, leaving his dad to raise him and his little sister. He still doesn't know why his mother left, he probably never will.

Gary didn't think much about work. Almost every man he knew used to work down the coal mine. That was never an option for Gary after the pits closed before he started High School. When the pits shut down he watched his dad's life slip away to alcoholism and gambling. Gary never had a real job but has made ends meet by cashing in his benefits cheque while also working from time to time at his mate's mechanic garage.

LIFE NOW

Now in his late thirties, Gary is still one of the lads. He lives on the council housing estate near his dad and sister. Most nights he plays football with his mates. He moved in with his long-term girlfriend and they are raising their teenage son. Gary is known on the estate as a man who is humorous, loves to party, and will do anything for you.

Everything changed for Gary when one of his best mates became a Christian. He couldn't believe it. He had never really met a Christian before but he couldn't deny that something real had happened to his friend. Gary had a ton of questions and patiently his friend worked with him until eventually he also gave his life to Christ and trusted in Him as his Saviour.

This is Gary's story...

WHAT'S THE POINT?

Living rightly in
GOD's world
begins with
relating rightly to
GOD.



1. WHERE DO I BEGIN?



GARY

Gary's been a Christian now for six months. He loves Jesus, but that feeling of being at war hasn't gone away. And now, as if living in the trenches wasn't enough, everybody seems to be telling him different things. His head's spinning. His pastor keeps pointing him to Jesus. But the problem is He's not the only voice.

His wife seems happy he's around more, but keeps nagging that he's not providing for her as well since he straightened up.

His dad's keeping his distance, but warning him not to take this religion stuff too seriously.

Some of his mates pat him on the back and tell him how well he's doing, but he gets the feeling they're waiting for him to fall.

A couple of the boys are always in his ear offering him an easy way back into the old easy lifestyle.

And then there's that one lad who loves the conspiracy theories and is certain the church has brainwashed him to control him.

Add to that the voices in his own head:

Is this war really worth it?

Wasn't your old life way more satisfying than this?

Did you really leave all of this behind to feel like this?

You really think you belong here, and deserve this?

When he used to make decisions it felt like he had an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. Now it feels like there's about a hundred on each shoulder.

Who should he listen to?



ILLUSTRATION

Remember when you were at school, and you and your mates walked into a classroom but instead of your normal teacher stood at the front, there was a supply-teacher standing there? Remember the thought that went through your mind?

'Today, we can get away with anything.'

But imagine the next day, your normal teacher's still off, but instead of the supply-teacher, the headmaster stood there. Now what goes through your mind?

'Today, we can get away with nothing.'

The point is that our relationship to someone always impacts our behaviour around them. It's not just true of pupils when a teacher walks in the room. It's true of you whether or not the person who walks in the room is...

your brother

your gran

the police

your dog

someone you're attracted to

your step-dad

How we relate to different people as they enter the room impacts what fills our thoughts and flows out in how we behave.

STOP

Q: Gary's got loads of voices in his head – his pastor, his partner, his dad, his friends. How might Gary's behaviour change depending on which one of them is in the room with him?



'The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel' (Prov. 1:1).

Right off the bat we see that this is a book written by a man called Solomon who is the son of a King. We might be tempted to think he must have been a clever fella who's had his life together and had everything he ever wanted. So, maybe it's tempting to think, *'What can this guy have to teach a guy like Gary? He's living in a different world.'*

But, don't be so quick to judge because when we jump into Solomon's story, we soon find out that he was a *normal* guy trying to make sense of life, and as *full of insecurities* as most of us. When he was about to take over from his dad as the King of Israel, he tried to wriggle out of it, and made his excuses to God saying, *'I am only a little child and I don't know how to carry out my duties.'*

How can I be a king when I feel more like a dunce?

But in the end, he prays to God saying, *'Give me a discerning heart.'*

In other words, *'God, give me wisdom.'*

In **1 Kings 4:29-34** we read that God heard his prayer, and makes him the wisest man on the planet. He became so wise and smart

that, eventually, people would travel the length of the planet to hear his wisdom. *If God can give Solomon wisdom and make him wise, He can give anyone wisdom – even Gary, and make him wise.* In fact,

the book of Proverbs is the *Wise God*,
 giving His foolish people a *wise king*,
 that they might learn to *live wisely too*.

God gives it to Solomon, that he might pass it on to people like Gary.

The book of Proverbs is massively important for Gary and for all Christians. Why? After all, it's not the first book that would jump out at us from the Bible. I'm not sure it would make the top 10 of most important books to teach new Christians.

It's important because King Solomon points us to an even greater King, the greatest King

JESUS

In **Matthew 12:42** *Jesus* is referred to as someone far *greater than Solomon*. Therefore, as we read through this short book together we need to remember that it's not just ancient history that has nothing to do with us. The book of Proverbs is

the Wise God,
 giving us
His foolish people
 the wisest King,

that we might learn to live wisely.

STOP

Q: When Gary's feeling overwhelmed by all the voices in his head, how can he make sure that he gets this voice – the voice of God's wisdom – into his head?



'...for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight; for receiving instruction in prudent behaviour, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young' (Prov. 1:2-4).

The first verse told us *who* wrote the book. These next verses tell us *why* he wrote it.

1. This book is going to teach Gary how to *think* (v. 2).

A Christian thinks very differently from those around them.

The world's wisdom and God's wisdom are *not* the same thing.

Gary's a new Christian, just getting to know this stuff. Becoming a Christian for him is no small thing but it is going to re-engage and re-do his entire thinking so that he '*loves the Lord his God with all his mind.*'

2. This book is going to teach Gary how to *act* (v. 3).

A Christian acts differently from those around them.

The world's morals and God's morals are *not* the same thing.

One of the important things about Christian behaviour the book's going to teach Gary is '*prudence*'. What does this word mean?

Prudence is behaviour that thinks with God's wisdom *before* acting.

The opposite of prudence is when we run gun-ho into something without thinking through the consequences. I think we've all probably been there in our lives. We've all probably rushed into a decision at one time or another without thinking through the consequences.

As a new Christian, the Bible says that *Gary is going to have to relearn how to live his life* and make decisions as a Jesus follower now. **It's going to be hard** and **it won't come naturally** because he's been so used to living life his way and on his own terms.



'...for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young – let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance – for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise' (Prov. 1:4-6).



GARY

Gary has never heard of the word '*prudence*,' let alone lived prudently. His whole life has been lived according to his emotions at any given time. He flies off the handle when provoked. He runs headlong into making decisions without thinking of the consequences.

In the past, when his son annoyed him he would get mad, and sometimes even react violently...

In the past, when his pals tempted him with anything he'd say yes just to be part of the crowd...

He has debts from maxing out his credit cards. He owes loan sharks and owes money everywhere from bad drug deals to buying cars he can't afford.

STOP

Q: What would it look like for Gary to now begin to live prudently? How could he begin to 'think wisely before acting' in these areas of his life?



'...for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young – let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance – for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise' (Prov. 1:4-6).

Notice who the book of Proverbs has been written for.

The simple**The young****The wise**

Who does he mean by *'the simple'*? Is he talking about people who aren't very bright? No. He's talking about those, like Gary, who are *new to the faith*. He's talking to those who are *inexperienced* when it comes to reading their Bibles and understanding what church is all about.

But he's also talking to *the young* who, Proverbs tells us, need a lot of wisdom because they are often fools. These are the kinds of people who are *not very teachable*. They think they know all the answers, often before they even understand the questions! They tend to be *unwise* in their choice of friends and they seem to *constantly give in* to sexual temptation and lust. They *live for the moment* and they don't care about eternal things.

Finally, Proverbs is also for the *wise*. Many Christians get comfortable the longer they go on in the Christian life. After a while, once they have a bit of knowledge under their belt, they begin to

think they've arrived. They begin to think of the good news about Jesus and discipleship as things for 'baby believers'. But they fail to realise that:

A Christian is *always* learning, *always* teachable.

A mature Christian is eager to *add* to their learning.

A wise Christian is *always aware* of how easy it is to fall into foolish thinking and behaviour.



GARY

When Gary goes to church he feels like everyone else in the room is 'fine.' He feels like he's the only one in the room struggling with the voices warring in his head. He feels completely out of place.

Gary needs to know that not everybody is fine. In fact, everybody is going through the same experience as he is but just at different levels and with different issues. **Gary needs to understand that everybody struggles to live wisely and prudently.**



'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction' (Prov. 1:7).



ILLUSTRATION

What do we do once we have learned the basics of the alphabet? We begin forming words. Then we begin forming sentences. Then paragraphs. What do we do when we learn the basics of mathematics? We put it into practice by counting and dividing and subtracting. In fact mathematics comes in pretty handy when we are handling money and paying our bills! The point is we learn the basics and then we begin to apply them to our daily lives. Soon we just write and shop and pay bills instinctively because the basics behind them are drilled into our minds.

The point is if we are going to learn how to apply *wisdom* in our daily lives, then we better get the basics right. If we want to get to a stage in our lives when applying wisdom and prudence to all our decisions is second nature, then we have to burn the basics behind it into our souls. So here's the question:

If the basics behind writing is learning the alphabet

If the basics behind handling money is learning mathematics

What are the basics behind acting wisely and prudently in the Christian life?

Here's the surprise. Here's what you might not expect. The answer to Gary's problem, according to the book of Proverbs, is *fear*. But what is '*the fear of the Lord*'? In the Bible the 'fear of the Lord' is a two-sided coin.

First, there's the fear of God for those who are not in a right relationship to God.

This fear is terror.

It is a frightening terror because our sin makes us liable to the judgment of God. We can go through the first couple of pages of the Bible when Adam and Eve rebel against God, but when they hear God walking in the garden they hide terrified *because they know they're going to face God's judgment.*

Those who are sinners in rebellion against God *ought to be* terrified of this God. In **Isaiah 33:14** we hear sinners crying in terror '*who of us can dwell with the consuming fire, who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?*'


If you're not a Christian


you may be afraid of nothing,

you may be afraid of everything,

but you must fear this one thing:

One terrifying day you will face the consequences of your rebellion against the Creator.

 *'It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Heb. 10:31).*


 **GARY**
 Gary's confused. He's thinking, *'But that's why I became a Christian. That fear of God's judgment was what drove me to trust that when Jesus died on the cross He took that judgment in my place. So surely now I don't have to fear God.'*

STOP

Q: What do you think? Is Gary right? How would you answer him?

Gary needs to understand that there is a second fear of the Lord – for those in right relationship to Him.

Gary's right, *he no longer has to fear God's judgment for his sin. But,* the Bible is clear, *even now his relationship with the Lord is to be one of 'fear.'* That's not just true in the Old Testament in books like Proverbs, but also in the New Testament.

 *'Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear' (1 Pet. 1:17).*

'Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor' (1 Pet. 2:17).

'Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling' (Phil. 2:12).

In other words, *God's people* are to be *God-fearers*.

But, Gary's question still stands. **If Jesus saves us from our sins and from the wrath of God to come, why exactly do we need to fear the Lord?**

Well, we may well be saved but that does not mean that we can take our new found peace with God for granted. In the book of Proverbs God is mentioned ninety-four times and in eighty-seven of those times He is given the title, *The Lord*.

When it comes to our relationship with the Lord, we must **never forget** exactly who our relationship is with and what side of the relationship we're on.

He's the Creator. *We're created.*

He's eternal. *We're here today, gone tomorrow.*

He's holy. *We're sinful.*

He's the Saviour. *We're the desperately needy.*

He's the Father. *We're His sons and daughters.*

See who He is?

See who we are?

See what side of the relationship we're on?

That impacts how we relate to Him.

And that impacts how we think and how we act.

We don't make the rules.

We don't pull the strings.

We don't call the shots.

We bow down and worship Him.

We stand in awe of Him.

We humbly obey Him.

We deeply respect Him.

In short, we 'fear' Him.

Think back to where we started this chapter. If the supply teacher's in the room, we behave in one way; If the headmaster's in the room, we behave another way; If a policeman's in the room, we behave in a certain way; If someone we're attracted to is in the room, we behave a different way; If our gran is in the room, we behave in a different way.

Much of Gary's behaviour is driven by fear. He fears letting his pastor down so he keeps plugging away at church. But he also fears his dad, and so when he's around him he plays down how seriously he's taking this Christian stuff. He really fears what his mates think of him, and so he denies how much time he's spending with Christians and lies about where he's been to try to preserve his reputation.

STOP

Q: How would Gary's behaviour change in all of these areas if he really learned 'the fear of the Lord?'

Knowing that we are in a relationship with the Lord, and knowing what side of the relationship we are on, means we know that the Lord's in every room.

He's everywhere.

He sees everything.

He hears everything.

He knows everything.

Gary's biggest problem, and ours, is that *we fear the wrong person*. The biggest factor that controls or changes our behaviour should not be dependent on the relationship we have with whoever walks in the room next, but on our relationship with *the Lord who is unchanging and everywhere*.

Gary's problems stem from the fact that he's been behaving like a chameleon. He's been acting differently around different people. He's been constantly working out where he is in the pecking order depending on who is in front of him. If he fears them, he falls into line. If he doesn't fear them, he'll make them fear him. He's found himself becoming pretty two-faced. *Imagine the difference in his life and his relationships if he began to truly fear the Lord over all other people in his life.*

**GARY**

How do I start? What do I do?

Again, we go back to the beginning, the ‘ABC’, the ‘123’, and we look once more at the cross of Jesus. It’s at the foot of the cross that we realise *the full terror of what our sins deserve*. It is at the foot of the cross that we stand in total awe of *The Lord Almighty who is to be feared above all*.

When Gary looks at the cross of Jesus he sees a God who he should love *and* fear.

He is awesome, and holy, and righteous.

But He is also gracious, and forgiving, and merciful.

This is the place where Gary entered into a relationship with Him; but there is no doubt which side of the relationship Gary is on.



MEMORY VERSE

‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction’ (Prov. 1:7).



SUMMARY

Gary, *listen, my son*. You need to make wise and prudent choices in every area of life. The only way you’re going to do this is to get wisdom from the only Wise King – God – and learn how to fear Him.