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Proverbs 1

¹ The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

² for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight;

³ for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair;

⁴ for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young-

⁵ let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance-

⁶ for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.

⁷ The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,

but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

New International Version of the Bible

Abbreviations

NIV	New International Version of the Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
MSG	The Message
NLT	New Living Translation
CEV	Contemporary English Version
NKJV	New King James Version
ESV	English Standard Version

“For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth
come knowledge and understanding.”

Proverbs 2:6 NIV

Chapter 1

If we all switched chairs, this conversation would be completely different.

Tim Dobbins is the youth leader who first helped me connect to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Tim was an amazing young man and volunteer with an outreach ministry called Young Life. He was only twenty years old at the time (I was eighteen). Tim's charisma was spell-binding for me as a senior in high school. I began to walk, talk, laugh, and think like Tim Dobbins. This was at a time when my desire for individuality was at an all-time high. Tim was a kid-magnet mostly because of how he made you feel about yourself. You felt like Tim really liked you and respected what you had to say. He knew that the key to ministry (and life in general) is not trying to get people to like you, rather letting them know that you like them. This was part of the magic of his personality.

Tim often brought laughter to our group when he would quip, "*You know, if we all switched chairs, this conversation would be completely different.*" I still smile when I think of this phrase. What in the world was he talking about? It took me awhile to make sense out of this. I thought Tim was just being funny. He was actually communicating an important truth that I would later discover for myself.

According to my father, who was a math professor, if you have five people in a meeting around a table, the potential number of combinations of where people are seated is a "Five factorial" or $5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 120$ different combinations. Each one would have its own distinct pattern of interaction. If you are in a meeting and things are not going well, maybe just ask everyone if they don't mind changing seats!

It makes me ask myself, "*How do I interact in groups?*" I notice that virtually every time I walk into a meeting, I check out the seating arrangement. I have become quite proficient at the skill of surveillance and strategy. I subtly decide on the best seat at the table to accomplish my personal goal. Is this wrong?

Sometimes, I intend to be an invisible member of the meeting. I simply want to stay beneath the radar screen; off the firing line. I want to avoid being stuck in the trenches. Carefully, I plot my words like an advisor to the general at military headquarters. I've prepared for battle and am running on stealth mode. Sounds like guerrilla warfare. Probably describes my state of mind in those meetings. Choose the seat least likely to draw attention to myself. My advantaged position is often silence followed by carefully crafted words.

At other times, I am determined to acquire the seat of power; seize and maintain through intellect and articulation. My goal is a specific outcome of the meeting. I may use humor, personal warmth or even gentle confrontation. I make sure my back is to the wall and the key players at the table are within eye contact and earshot. Chairs that are slightly elevated are best. Regardless of my agenda, I am almost always intentional about where I sit in a meeting. I do not want to be vulnerable. I want to operate from a perspective of control.

But somehow, the words of Jesus keep popping up in my head. He was keenly aware of where people sat at the table. He says we are to take the lesser seat; to avoid lording power over others. One time, Jesus confronted two brothers vying for positions of power. *"Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all." (Mark 10:42-44)*

What if we rearranged the seating at a table? Would the conversation be completely different? Do I apply this same principle to how I choose my clothing, what car I drive, who my friends are, where I live and work? Do I tend to put myself in an advantaged position? Does my being in an advantaged position put others in a disadvantaged position? Does my being an "insider" create "outsiders?"

If my position at the table was one of the uneducated working man, would I have a different perspective? If I were a woman at the table, would I find sexual innuendoes in the conversation to be charming or cute? If I were a person of color, would I understand the tenseness on the faces of the others in the room when I express a controversial opinion?

The beginning of knowledge is recognizing that which we have not experienced—of knowing where we haven't been or cannot go. This is part of the reason we pay close attention to those in other seats at the table.

How does it feel to be dying of cancer? What would it be like to have an adult child who is mentally handicapped? How hard is it to live with a spouse or child with mental illness? How difficult is life for those who are in prison or have a criminal record? What is it like to lose a child? What makes sense when nothing makes sense?

I have spent most of my adult life in ministry with people from whom I am different. Often referred to as "cross-cultural" ministry, this means I am an outsider in another culture. I am the one who is different. I am white, and have ministered with African-American youth. I am an adult and have entered the world of the adolescent. I worked on behalf of people with brain injury yet have not personally experienced this trauma. I am hearing and currently minister within the Deaf community. Make no mistake about it; if you are ministering in another culture, you are always a visitor, regardless of where you sit at the table.

The one thing we share in common, across all cultures, is our incredible need for connection with God and each other. The ground really is level at the foot of the cross. We are truly equals and equally in need of right relationships. Gather with those different from yourself. Approach them as equals who have more to teach you than you have to teach them. You are the visitor. Go with respect, humility, vulnerability; then God will use you.

Tim was right. If we switched chairs, this conversation would be completely different. Any meal-time discussion is best when Jesus is the honored guest at the table. We come together as brothers and sisters in Christ. Let's listen carefully to Jesus and to each another. Pay attention to the seating arrangement. Notice and respect the opinions of others at the table. You will learn

a great deal from their life experiences. Humility is an essential building block for impacting the lives of others; for being a caring person. We have much to learn from each other.

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**Where is he now?** Tim Dobbins is the President of Leadership Technologies, Inc., and works as a leadership and communications consultant to business, government and not-for-profit organizations here and abroad. He is valued as a keynote speaker and corporate retreat leader. He designs conferences, leads seminars, lectures, and writes on cultural architecture, leadership development, executive coaching, conflict management, and organizational team building. He has been a guest lecturer at the Wharton School and is a Fellow of the British-American Project, affiliated with Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies and The Royal Institute, London. He studied and taught in Jerusalem, the United Kingdom and Zurich. Tim is the author of *Business Companion*, a business phrase book translated into Chinese, Spanish, and German. He is also author of *“Making the Most of Change: Strategies for the Oval Office and Your Office”*-Random House.

*The tailor should not covet the carpenter’s nail, and the carpenter  
should not despise the tailor’s needle.*  
Charles W. Conn

“My child, never forget the things I have taught you. Store my commands in your heart, for they will give you a long and satisfying life.”

Proverbs 3:1-2 NLT

## Chapter 2

Show up. Show up, dressed.  
Show up, dressed and ready to play.

Back when I was teaching middle and high school, a motivational speaker was brought in at the beginning of the school year to inspire the teachers. The entire faculty was gathered for a required training event in the middle school cafeteria. The speaker looked a bit like a used car salesman to me. His hair was black “from-a-bottle” and slicked back in a style common thirty years earlier. I was all attitude thinking, “*What a goofball. Why in the world do I have to sit here and listen to him?*” It was my first year of teaching and I had plenty of work waiting for me. I took my seat, slouched a bit and kept one eye on the clock.

Pride goes before the fall or in this instance, the autumn. This motivational speaker proclaimed one of the more significant things I’ve heard over the years and have used it as a foundation for facing many of my challenges in life. The first step in learning something new is recognizing the absence of prior knowledge. I was never very good at that first step. As I get older, humility comes more naturally to me.

He told the story of a conversation he had with a young man who approached him after he had given a previous motivational speech.

The young man asked, “*What do I need to do to be successful?*”

This sage thought for a moment and then responded plainly, “Show up.”

There was a brief silence.

“*What do you mean?*”

“Just show up. That’s all you need to do. You will have a delightful and successful life. People will appreciate you and acknowledge your contributions.”

“*Okay...*” the young man nodded hesitantly. “*Just show up*” seemed like an odd response but *whatever*.

The speaker continued, “Now, if you *really* want to get ahead, receive accolades and have people remark about your impressive qualities, then... show up, *dressed*.”

“*Dressed?*”

“Yes, dressed. Not only clean and in pleasant attire but with your mind dressed. Your attitude dressed. Give attention to the details of how you present yourself. Be ready to perform.”

The young man had an expression locked somewhere between incredulity and horror. These were not the answers he was pursuing. Certainly, there had to be more. “*You mean, that’s all there is to it.*”

“*Oh, no. There’s one more thing*” the wise teacher continued.

“If you *REALLY* want to blow them away, take control, have buildings named after you, find yourself in positions of influence and power, then show up... dressed... and *ready to play.*”

“*Ready to play?*”

“*Ready to play.*”

Silence.

“*Show up prepared.* Study the issue before the meeting. Think of alternatives and solutions before you walk in the door. Be ready to play; ready to present your ideas. Have your handouts printed and the master plan in your mind. If you will do this simple thing, you will control the world. That’s about all there is to it. *Show up... show up dressed...and ready to play.*”

I am now aware that this is an old football saying used to inspire young men at the first practice of the season but for me, it was new. *So, maybe I was late to football practice once or twice.* Besides, the speaker told the story as though it really happened. *Maybe it actually did!*

The rest of his presentation faded into the recesses of my memory but his point was simple yet profound. I was so dull; I didn’t really get it at first. My mind was busy and distracted. The wisdom of these words dawned on me over the next few months. Over the past twenty or so years, it has virtually become a mantra of mine.

There are times in my life that the best I can do is *show up*. Anyone who has raised children understands this adage. *Show up* for doctor’s appointments. *Show up* for teacher conferences. *Show up* for housework. *Show up* for your spouse. *Show up* for dinner. *Show up* for conversations with your children. *Show up* and you will survive.

There are many ministry situations that are simply unpleasant. I have visited friends in jail and in hospitals and found myself repeating, *just show up*. Ministers who never put themselves in uncomfortable situations are not real ministers, they are entertainers. They only perform for appreciative crowds. It is amazing how important it is to show up in during the difficult times in people’s lives. Don’t let uncertainty paralyze you, respond. Start by simply *showing up*.

Secondly, be aware of how you present yourself. Show up, *dressed*. Have a positive attitude about the opportunity to love other people. God has given you a life full of hope. Share the wealth of abundant life. Meet people on their level. Be willing to adapt your appearance to fit the situation. This may mean wearing a nice outfit to a business lunch or jeans and a t-shirt when you are hanging out with teenagers. But it is much more than just what you wear, it is how you *dress* your mind; how you view the other person. See them as God sees them. Dress yourself in garments that allow you to see others through God’s eyes. Look people in the eye even if they make you uncomfortable. Adorn yourself with respect for others. *Dress* yourself with class.

Finally, show up, dressed and *ready to play*. It takes a tremendous amount of planning to make something look spontaneous and fresh. The mark of a professional is someone who can accomplish incredible feats and make it look easy. This only happens because the professional was preparing while others were out wasting time. Study the situation before entering into it. Ask advice of others who have been there before. Prayer is a vital part of showing up *ready to play*. There is nothing magical about excellence. It is simply a matter of taking your responsibilities seriously enough to prepare. In Luke 14:28-29, Jesus spoke of the importance of estimating costs before beginning to build... show up *prepared*.

Jesus uses another story to warn about being unprepared. *"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut."* Matthew 25:1-10

Are you a caring person? Do you want to have the full impact on the lives of others? Do you want to be an effective minister? Do you want your life to "make a difference in this world?"

*Show up.*

*Show up dressed.*

*Show up dressed and ready to play.*

*Fame is sometimes accidental, but greatness never is.*  
Charles W. Conn

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean  
on your own understanding; in all your ways  
acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”

Proverbs 3:5-6 NASB

## Chapter 3

God is with you through the darkness.

**Robin Groth** and I were best friends in high school. We started a folk music group (okay, so I'm showing my age) and wrote all our own music. We called ourselves *Horizon*. Neither of us had an understanding of a personal relationship with God at this point but even the name of the group spoke about what was to come; hope for a new day. Our music reflected a quest for truth and meaning in life. There was a longing in our hearts for a connection with God.

Robin knew me at my loneliest time. I was not a Christian when we first became friends. Her laughter brought light into my world. She has bright, blue eyes and natural blond hair that reflects her German heritage. She has a wonderful, quick laugh and accomplished musical skills. We spent many hours dreaming of Colorado and adventures in the world of performing music.

Robin and I never dated. There was nothing romantic about our relationship, only a warm and abiding friendship. We stopped playing music together during my senior year of high school and drifted apart. I was busy with school and work and dating. We both moved on to other interests and lost touch.

During my senior year of high school, I became a Christian. Through relationships with Christian adults who loved me in spite of my faults, I was able to make sense of God's incredible grace. It was a process that took a few months but at some point I realized that if God loved me that much, I could learn to love myself. I accepted the abundance of the love of the one who created me.

After high school, I became a volunteer leader with a youth ministry program. I was a young Christian. It was an exciting time of growing and learning each day what it means to follow Jesus Christ. God was doing a major renovation of my mind and spirit. I slept little and often carried on deep discussions into the early morning hours over coffee and cheesecake.

One time, late in the evening, I was at a party at a friend's house when I received a call. It was from Robin. We had not talked for almost two years. I answered the phone in a noisy living room. I had to close my eyes and plug my other ear to understand her quiet voice on the phone.

"Are you busy?" She said.

"No," I fibbed. "What's up?"

*"I just need to talk with someone. I didn't know who to call. Can we meet somewhere?"*  
*"Sure."*

We picked a local 24-hour restaurant. I arrived first and selected a table in a vacant section in the back. We hugged as she reached the table and it was great to see each other. It had been a long time since we were together. We ordered a pot of coffee and dessert.

I remember enjoying a great conversation about a number of things but there seemed to be nothing specific on the agenda. She knew I had accepted Christ and was interested in how this impacted my life. We chatted. I told her about my personal experience with Jesus Christ and the new hope I found. I simply opened my heart and shared about my experience. A few hours later, we hugged again and went our separate ways. I quietly wondered why she phoned me, late at night, and called me away from a party for a somewhat casual conversation.

I later learned it was a matter of life and death.

It was an extremely fragile time in her life that night and my name kept coming up in her mind. I still don't know how she got the number for my friend's house. I'm glad she did. Our conversation gave her hope. Robin soon became a follower of Jesus Christ. She later told me that her deal with God was, *if you are real, let there be someone who shows that they care*. Completely unaware, I simply showed up.

Three weeks after accepting Jesus into her life as Lord and Savior, Robin was confronted with a terrible crisis. Her father, step-mother, little sister, and their baby-sitter were all killed in a car crash. The news was an incredible shock.

Robin's relationship with her father had been estranged; it was in the initial process of being rekindled. Suddenly, he was gone. Three weeks after becoming a Christian, she was slammed with the reality that horrific things sometimes happen to good people. Life can become unbelievably painful. People die; the hurt lives on.

How did Robin respond?

She could have totally rejected the God of the universe for the tragedy that so closely followed her conversion but she didn't. She drew near. She let the One who knew ultimate sorrow, draw her closely and hold her. There was no hint of trying to explain away the shock and grief; Robin knew that sometimes bad things happen in life. Sometimes, there is no logic to make sense of the illogical... but always, God is with us.

*"When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'" (John 8:12)* Jesus later comforted his disciples with these words. *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me."* (John 14:1)

One cannot turn bad things into good things by simply attributing them to God. Bad things are bad things. God can use even bad experiences to bring about good things but this doesn't change the reality of evil. Ultimately God wins but remember he is not the only player on the field. There is another who is the author of brokenness. The good news is that we are not alone as we face crises. God wins.

*She held the nail-scarred hand as she stood before the tomb.*

*Life would never be the same.*

*But she was never alone.*

Robin became a volunteer leader with the youth ministry program. We worked closely together over the next number of years. She is a strong, loving, fun, woman of God who brings character and kindness to her ministry. She understands pain. She also understands the comfort that only a relationship with the Creator brings.

Isaiah 53:3 refers to the Messiah as a “*man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.*” The writer of Hebrew defines our Lord as one who faced every temptation; even the temptation we experience to turn our backs on God when life gets too painful. Yet, Jesus never sinned. “*Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*” Hebrew 4:14-16.

Robin found mercy and grace in her time of need. She found comfort. She made it through the dark days and has the strength to face more. She is now a social work counselor; a mentor and friend to many. She can empathize with other’s pain. She, too, has walked through the valley of the shadow of death. She is no stranger to loss. She is also familiar with hope that comes only from knowing you are loved, with the deepest love, by the Creator of the Universe. Life has meaning, even in darkness, when we realize that great love God has for us. Psalm 17:8 says, “*Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.*” Our worth comes from knowing God believes we are worthy.

Robin always wanted to live out west. Three years after we graduated from high school, I helped her jam all her things into my yellow, Volkswagen beetle and drove her across the country to deliver her to the land of her dreams. She got to live in her Colorado Rocky Mountains.

People have different ways to try to make sense out of tragedy. Some may try to give comfort by attributing evil events to a loving God. They may hide behind religion. “*God’s ways are mysterious. We cannot understand why God has done this.*” God calls us into relationship, not religion. I personally believe this perspective of God as the author of evil sets people up for a crisis of faith. It may give temporary relief but plants the seeds of deep doubts as to the very nature and existence of God. I think it is much healthier to accept the reality of our broken world and recognize that God will never leave us or forsake us. He is our Comforter. He gives, “*the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*” (Philippians 4:7) This is all that we need.

Shortly before his death, Jesus sat at the table with his closest friends and whispered these words, “*Peace, I leave with you. My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.*” (John 14:27)

Robin has been there and she knows.

Do not be afraid.

God is with you through the darkness.

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Where is she now? Robin Groth Miller lives in Missoula, Montana with her husband, Theron. She has a Masters in Counseling; having worked twenty years as a therapist, the last fourteen years at the Mental Health Center in Missoula working with Adults diagnosed with serious mental illnesses. Her hobbies include backpacking, hiking, cross country skiing, rafting, travel, reading, and being outdoors. Robin and Theron celebrated their 20th wedding anniversary by taking a trip to Norway – A far different trip than their honeymoon when they took a two-month bicycle trip from Seattle to Alaska. Robin’s favorite scripture is Philippians 3:12-17, “*Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have*

taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained. Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.” Her favorite bumper sticker is “The Best Form of Revenge is Living Well.”

God will hear the cry of His children from afar, but we should live so close to Him that He can hear our faintest whisper of prayer.

Tears are the prisms that make rainbows in the soul.

Charles W. Conn

Discussion Guide for Small Group Studies

After participants read each chapter, use the following questions as a discussion guide. Discuss the scriptures. Conclude with, “How does this principle apply to your personal ministry?”

Chapter 1—If we switched chairs, this conversation would be different.

Tell about someone who made you feel good about yourself.

Do you notice the seating arrangement when you enter a room for a meeting? How does it feel to be in a disadvantaged position? What is the danger of vying for a position of power?

“The beginning of knowledge is recognizing that which we have not experienced; of knowing where we haven’t been or cannot go.” What does the author mean?

Do you agree with the statement that you are always a visitor in a cross-cultural ministry? Why or why not?

Scripture reference: Mark 10:42-44

Chapter 2—Show up. Show up, dressed. Show up, dressed and ready to play.

Have you ever learned something of value from someone when you didn’t expect to? What is the danger in pre-judging someone?

Why is it important to “show up” for ministry? How does paying “attention to the details” of how we present ourselves important? Can you carry this too far? How?

Share about a time you showed up *ready to play*. How did it feel?

Scripture reference: Luke 14:28-29

Chapter 3—God is with you through the darkness.

When was the loneliest time in your life? Who helped you through it?

What other ways could Robin have reacted? How would you react? Have you ever experienced this type of crisis? What helped you get through it? What would you say to someone in a similar situation?

Does this provide more comfort than to believe that God is in charge of all things, even tragedy?

Scripture references: John 8:12; John 14:1; John 14:27

About the Author

Bob Ayres is a husband, father, friend, minister, educator, and writer who lives in Louisville, Kentucky with his wife, Kathy and their children, Christina, David, Casey, John and Ana. Bob grew up in Florida and still sports a *Gators* tag on the front of the family van. He graduated from the University of Florida in Gainesville, Florida with a Bachelor of Arts in Education, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville with a Master of Religious Education and Brenau University in Gainesville, Georgia with a Master of Education. He continues to ponder about a doctoral program but has to wait in line for family educational funding.

Bob has skills for bringing people together around common missions. He has used these strengths for the development of non-profit and ministry organizations for the purpose of helping others physically, emotionally, intellectually, relationally, and spiritually. He has led in establishing various programs and organizations over the years. He has a unique ability to understand a need, creatively conceptualize a solution, design an effective strategy for meeting this need, and implementing the appropriate program or idea.

Bob and Kathy are the founders of a national outreach ministry for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing teenagers called DeafYouth Ministries. The program name for the local ministries is *DTQuest* which is a shortened form of Deaf Teen Quest. *DTQuest* is most similar to *Young Life* or *Youth For Christ* for Deaf teenagers. More can be learned about the ministry of DTQuest at the website, www.dtquest.org

You can also find a list of other books by Bob Ayres at www.bobayres.com