

Proverbs 1

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[0 : 00] Well, let's just pray once more. Heavenly Father, you tell us that your word is more precious than gold and sweeter than honey.

And we pray that it would be those things to us tonight, that we would see its value and we would taste its sweetness. For we ask in Christ's name. Amen. Okay, well, has anyone ever told you that the Bible is full of contradictions?

You ever heard that the Bible is full of contradictions? Well, famously, there's one in Proverbs. So if you've got a Bible, you might want to flick to it. It's Proverbs 26, verse 4 and 5.

So listen to this. Proverbs 26, verse 4. Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Verse 5.

Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes. Okay, well, there's a contradiction in two verses. Which is it? Do I answer a fool according to his folly or do I not answer him according to his folly?

[1 : 17] Although people have pointed out that in the English language, our own proverbs are equally contradictory. So absence makes...

Yeah, but out of sight. Many hands. Too many cooks. So, you see, that's just a common thing with Proverbs.

And if you've got experience with a different culture, different language, perhaps you've got your own examples of that. You see, it's not a strict contradiction here in Proverbs.

It's a question of wisdom. Now, wisdom is not knowing a lot of stuff, but it's knowing how to act. It's not knowing the right things, but knowing the right things to do. And, of course, it's not straightforward. That's why so often in our prayers we pray for wisdom.

[2 : 16] And we pray for wisdom for other people, don't we? We don't live in a black and white world. We live in a world where there is a lot of gray, at least from our perspective.

And all the situations that we face, well, often they're complicated. And we struggle to know what's for the best. And so there in that pair of verses in Proverbs 26 is it's saying sometimes, you know, when you're talking to a fool, it's sometimes wise to answer them, to kind of take part in their foolishness, to expose them for the fool that they are.

But sometimes, actually, it's wise to ignore them. You've got to rise above it. You've got to allow them to be foolish and don't try and join in with the game they're playing. You need wisdom to know whether you're in a 26 verse 4 or 26 verse 5 situation.

And wisdom is what we're going to be looking at. Just these three weeks, I'm really concentrating on the first few chapters of Proverbs. You might know that the first section, kind of chapters 1 to 9, are framed as a father addressing a son.

And then when you get into chapter 10 and following, that's where we get all the little pithy sayings that we perhaps associate more with Proverbs. So what we're going to do in these next three evening services is just lay some foundations for biblical wisdom.

[3 : 53] So if you've got Proverbs 1 open, verse 2, That's what we're about.

That's what we're signed up for. Trying to get this wisdom and instruction and understanding. The first thing I want to look at tonight is, because this is God's world, wisdom is worth pursuing.

Because this is God's world, wisdom is worth pursuing. Let's have a look down in verse 8, where Solomon says, You know, kids, it's like when your parents say, listen to me.

But this is important, you've got to hear. I want you to be wise. And the whole book is going to be telling this son, look, pursue wisdom, a wise course of life, instead of folly and foolishness.

And of course, the first answer, as kids, the first answer we often say back to our parents is, Well, why should I? Why should I? Well, because this is God's world.

[5 : 18] Not because you're under my roof, you follow my rules. But no, it's because this is God's world. So what do I mean by that? We don't live in a chaotic, random world.

It often feels like that, doesn't it? But we don't. We live in an ordered world. A world that is ordered by the creator. And it's where our decisions and actions have meaning and consequences. In a chaotic world, it would make no difference. If you're lazy or you're hardworking. If you're trustworthy or dishonest.

You know, if you've got integrity or you're a hypocrite, like we were talking about earlier. But in God's world, it matters because he has so ordered his world that lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth.

That's chapter 10, verse 4. And whoever walks in integrity walks securely. But he who makes his ways crooked will be found out. That's Proverbs 10, verse 9.

[6 : 26] Now those Proverbs are not absolute guarantees, are they? Of course not. We know that. But they are reliable generalizations.

Okay, so again, for the children, but we've probably all done this. When you build a train track, have you got a train set at home? You know, if you build a sort of Brio wooden train set, then what happens?

The trains go along the tracks, don't they, nicely? Life is like that. It's not random. It goes along tracks. If you choose a certain track, you can expect a certain destination.

Now, due to sin, actually, the train track doesn't always work. And we know this, don't we? When we've built train tracks at home, you know, sometimes the pieces come apart. Sometimes the pieces get broken.

And we hide them under the sofa so Dad doesn't find them. And sometimes the trains just come off the tracks. And even the big trains, don't they?

[7 : 30] Sometimes they have to pull them off the tracks and try and work out why they're cracking. But you see, it's on the whole. Life in God's world is ordered.

Wise decisions, wise actions will ordinarily, usually bring about better outcomes for us. And those better outcomes can be defined in any number of ways.

You read chapter 2 through the week and you see some of the benefits of following wisdom. We're not going to particularly look at that, but read that in the week. The treasure that is to be found in living wisely.

And so, we're in a train track world, but it doesn't always work. Now, when we zoom out, big picture, of course it does work.

Because in the eternal perspective, Christians do have an absolute guarantee. That faith in Christ will lead us to heaven by his grace.

[8 : 39] At that point, all the sufferings and injustices that we've experienced will indeed seem like light and momentary troubles. But Proverbs itself is focused on this life.

Proverbs is telling you about how you live your life wisely now. Now, if there's no God, rather than a train track, you know, it's like pushing your little toy train, just kind of pushing it straight off a mountain.

You've got no idea how or where it will land, but you know it won't be pretty. It's all a game of chance. With no God, there is no reason to live one way rather than another.

But because, and only because, this is God's world, wisdom is worth pursuing.

Okay, but secondly, because this is God's world, true wisdom is rooted in him. True wisdom is rooted in him. So, we think about all those moments of decision that we have in life.

[9 : 50] Moments where we don't know what to do. It might be something to do with our job, how we're spending our time, a particular relationship. It might be thinking about, am I going to challenge this person on something that they've said or posted online?

Am I going to speak up? Am I going to stay quiet? All those times when we're making decisions, we want to be wise, and we're influenced by so many things. So, playing into every decision you make will be your upbringing, your friends, people you admire, things that you've read, things that you've heard, the culture that you live in.

And all of those things will be helpful, or less helpful, to varying degrees. We even talk about received wisdom, don't we? You know, the received wisdom is other people who found themselves in this sort of situation have found...

But for us as believers, we need something else. We need to know that true wisdom is rooted in God. So, Proverbs 1, verse 7, says, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

So, knowledge. Knowledge in Proverbs is not mere information. Okay, we've got information. Information is easy, isn't it? Information at your fingertips. You know, you could easily find out for me what the weather is in Singapore, a list of all the Australian prime ministers there have ever been, how far it is to the nearest star.

[11 : 27] You know, information is easy. Knowledge and wisdom are more in this book. It's about discernment.

It's about, as I said before, not knowing stuff, but knowing what to do. And it starts with what?

The fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. And, parallel verse, in chapter 9, verse 10, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

That's where you need to start. If you want to live wisely, you need to start with the fear of the Lord. What's that mean? What's the fear of the Lord?

Well, how would you describe a butterfly to someone? Okay, again, kids, have to think about that. You know, if someone said, well, what's a butterfly? How would you go about describing that? Well, it wouldn't be much help if you told them what butter was, and then you told them what it meant to fly, would it?

[12 : 33] Okay, that doesn't really tell you what a butterfly is. That's not my own analogy, that's off a commentator, but I think it's a good one. He says, you know, in the same way, you can't understand fear of the Lord by working out what fear is and working out what the Lord is.

This is a phrase that hangs together. This is something that goes together. The fear of the Lord. It's about a right acknowledgement that this is God's world and then, therefore, having a right all before him, living in the world as if it's his world.

And so when we say that the beginning of knowledge or the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, what it's saying is, actually, you have to have God in his rightful place first before you try and do anything else.

That's the backdrop to the whole of Proverbs, the backdrop to the whole of what it means to live wisely in biblical terms. I remember talking with my kids once about which direction north was. Maybe you've had this conversation and we're trying to work out, you know, which way are all the roads going and the kids saying, well, this way is north because this is the way I'm facing. But then one of the other kids is saying, no, no, this is north because this is the way I'm facing.

[13 : 56] And you think, actually, north is the way I'm facing. That means south is the way that I'm not facing. It's a frustrating conversation. They don't believe you.

But north doesn't change. It doesn't matter which way I'm facing, north doesn't change. I should have looked up where it is. It doesn't matter because north doesn't change. When you're out orienteering, you have to orientate yourself to north.

Not the other way around. And it's the same with God. If you're going to live in God's world, you have to orientate yourself to him.

When we try and live and make decisions without reference to God, we're like that child inventing their own north. It's this way. It's this way.

But no, this is God's world. And the book of Proverbs is very practical. You see, it's not just telling us about worship.

[15 : 01] It tells us about family and work and money and how we speak and tell us about pride and marriage. It's almost as if.

It's almost as if God is interested in every area of your life. Because of course he is. Christ is Lord over every area of your life.

And so the decisions that you make in your family and at work, the way that you choose to use your tongue, the way that you choose to use social media.

The things that you do and the things that you don't do are all decisions that God is interested in. And therefore, we need God's wisdom for every decision.

True wisdom is rooted in him. But how are we to get it? Well, we get it by reading his word. We get it through the wisdom books like the book of Proverbs.

[16 : 08] But it's available to us. It's available to us because of Christ. We read in Colossians 2, verse 3, about Christ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

You see, for us as Christians, we go to Christ. He is the one who stores up the wisdom for us. He is the place where we go to find what is the right thing to do.

And as the letter of James says, if anyone lacks wisdom, what should he do? He should pray. We ask God for the wisdom that we need. You see, God cares about the decisions that you're going to face this week at work, at school, at home, in the shops.

God cares about those decisions. And if you feel that you lack wisdom, then you ask and you seek from the one who has all those treasures of wisdom hidden within.

When I was looking about Proverbs, I found out that the University of Waterloo in Canada has something called the Wisdom and Culture Lab. and they're investigating, they're analyzing wisdom.

[17 : 25] And they came to an amazing conclusion. They said, what we really found out, Igor Grossman was the professor who I was reading. He said, what we found out was wisdom starts with accepting that you don't know everything.

Wisdom starts with accepting you don't know everything. Well, we could have told them that and we could have gone one further. Wisdom starts with knowing that you don't know everything but that God does.

We have limitations. He does not. So we bow the knee to the one who does know everything. And so, this is the reason why living according to the Bible is the best way to live.

And we know it doesn't always feel like it. Sometimes we think that the Bible is making demands on us that are unreasonable. We think that God is telling us to live in a way that makes us stand out, that makes us unpopular, that brings us all sorts of grief and we think this cannot be the best way to live.

But it is because it's from God in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. it's the same reason that it does often look strange to people who aren't Christians.

[18 : 49] Because they're following a different north. Their life is orientated the wrong way. But you see, you might be thinking that as we say that, as we say we need God to make these wise choices, what about our atheist friends?

what about Muslim friends, Hindu friends? Can't they ever make a wise choice? Well, yes they can to an extent.

Because all human beings are made in God's image. We all benefit from his common grace in the world. We all live in a world that runs along his brio tracks. And so yes, using our culture and our background and our upbringing and our friends and that received wisdom, we can make wise choices.

We can do things which are better than complete disaster. But actually, if we're not making those decisions, acknowledging the fact that this is God's world, then ultimately it is foolish.

Because it's living in a way that says actually I'm in control. I'll tell you where north is. Instead of saying no, this is God's world. And I'm living for him.

[20 : 12] So that's what we're doing as we're thinking about wisdom. Because this is God's world, true wisdom is rooted in him.

That's why we go to him. Thirdly and finally, because this is God's world, be careful who you listen to. Be careful who you listen to.

This is where we bring to mind the busiest market you've ever been to. Countless voices shouting to you over the din. And perhaps it's been a year or two since we've been in a very crowded place, but do you remember what it's like?

The hustle and the bustle, people shouting to you, offering you fruit and bread and mobile phone covers, all the things that you have to go out for, the essentials. Proverbs uses that picture of being in a busy marketplace place.

And he says, actually the world is going to be shouting at you. You're going to be hearing all these different voices competing for your attention. And because it's God's world, it matters who you listen to.

[21 : 16] If it's not God's world, listen to who you like. But because it's God's world, it matters. Verse 10, my son, if sinners entice you, do not consent.

Do not go along with them. Do not give in to them. It's the classic sort of wrong crowd. Do you remember being warned about that growing up?

You know, don't fall in with the wrong crowd. If you were never warned about falling in with the wrong crowd, it probably was because you were the wrong crowd. And everyone else was avoiding

you.

This is the wrong crowd. These are the people who say, come along with us. We'll tell you how to live, and it will be great. They want you to join living in their folly.

And so as the chapter goes on, it's talking about this gang lying in wait to ambush these unsuspecting travelers, violence and thievery.

[22 : 21] worry. But you know, the voices that entice us will not always be that dramatic. But the danger is still there, the danger of being influenced by those who have no fear of the Lord.

The voices that come to you that say, live this way. But you see, if they are doing that without any fear of the Lord, then those decisions, the paths that they're enticing you down are not wise.

They promise you all sorts, don't they? They promise you riches and happiness and fulfillment. And you know, we know the path is leading away from God. We know that actually when we go along with this crowd or this thinking or this way of living, we know it's taking us away from God and yet we just can't avoid it.

It appeals to us, it looks so enticing. If sinners entice you, he says in verse 10, what is it that is enticing you away from living for God?

That voice in your head that justifies your greed, I deserve it. Or the voice in your head that justifies your revenge, they deserve it.

[23 : 49] The voice that is urging you to put yourself first, before family, before church, before God. So Jesus teaches us to pray, lead us not into temptation.

Don't let the sinners entice me. But in all this clamor, there's another voice. We strain to hear it, and just faintly across the airwaves and the breeze, there it is, verse 20, wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the market, she raises her voice.

At the head of the noisy street, she cries out at the entrance of the city gate, she speaks. Wisdom herself, now this is wisdom personified for us. Wisdom at her own market stall saying, this is where you need to get to, come to me, listen to me.

If we fail to listen, it will end in disaster. Verse 29, because they hated knowledge and they did not choose the fear of the Lord, would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way and have their fill of their own devices.

But, if we listen to wisdom, if we listen to her, the path is life. Verse 33, whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease without dread of disaster.

[25 : 33] to listen to wisdom then is to live true life, secure life. Now, that raises questions for us.

Well, sorts of questions, but what about? It doesn't always seem. Hopefully, we'll address some of those in the next couple of weeks. But, for tonight, let's concentrate on this, that wisdom starts with getting God in his rightful place.

Listening to the voice of God-given wisdom, and seeking to bring that wisdom to bear on every aspect of your life.

Let's pray together.