

Proverbs 3:1-12

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. And we ask that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts would be pleasing in your sight, O Lord. Amen.

! Okay, we are going to be in Proverbs, but we're going to start in Matthew. So if you've got a Bible, have your finger in Proverbs, but turn to Matthew chapter 14. And it's a familiar story.

So children, you remember this story when Jesus told his friends to go ahead of him. So they all got in a boat and started rowing away from shore. Jesus went to pray. And then something very extraordinary happened.

Okay, so I'm in Matthew 14. And let's pick it up. Let's pick it up in halfway through verse 23.

When evening came, Jesus was there alone. But the boat by this time was a long way from land, beaten by the waves for the wind was against them.

[1 : 13] And in the fourth watch of the night, Jesus came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified and said, it's a ghost.

And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them saying, take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid. And Peter answered him, Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.

He said, come. Okay, here's the question. Was Peter safer inside the boat or outside?

Okay, ordinarily that would be a stupid question, wouldn't it? You know, if you break down, would you rather wait at the side of the road or in the middle of the road? But it's the presence of Jesus or the fact of Jesus that makes all the difference for Peter.

Is it wise to step out of a boat in the middle of a storm? No. Would it have been wise for Peter to stay in the boat after Jesus had called?

[2 : 29] No. See, it's this thing about God, the fact of God. The fact that he exists makes all the difference in the way that we live our lives.

It makes the wisest decisions of the world look foolish. And it means that Christians often look foolish in the eyes of the world. See, if you've been someone watching from the shore, it's in the middle of the night, so you don't need night vision goggles.

But if you've been stood on the shore watching what was happening, you would think Peter had just flipped, that he'd got a death wish. What is he doing getting out of the boat? But when Jesus has called, that is the only wise thing to do.

You might know that book, John Altberg's famous book, if you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat. But, you know, I think we need to avoid this idea that it's only super spiritual Christians, or only at extraordinary times of our life that we have to get out of the boat.

Because actually, it's everyday Christianity. Ordinary Christianity is lived on the water, not in the boat. You see, we need to live with that constant recognition and that deliberate focus on God.

[4 : 00] So as we read on, Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and beginning to sink, cried out, Lord, save me.

So it's when Peter sees the wind that he begins to sink. Proverbs is a book all about how we live in God's world.

And we're in chapter 3 tonight. And the question for us is, are we going to live in God's world as if he's there or as if he's not? Are you in the boat?

Or are you on the water with your eyes on Jesus? So in this little section, we've got Proverbs 3, 1 to 12. It's six pairs of calls with consequences.

Okay, you might have picked that up as we go through. So it's calls and then consequences in these six pairs. Just see how that works. We'll not read it all, but we'll kind of go through quickly. So verse 1, do not forget my teaching.

[5 : 18] So heed godly instruction. And then the consequence, verse 2, length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you. Verse 3, again, the call is let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you.

And what will it lead to? What's the consequence? Verse 4, you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man. Verse 5 and 6, perhaps famously, trust in the Lord with all your heart. So lean not on your own understanding. Lean on God. The consequence, verse 6, in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths. Life runs smoothly.

If you were here last week, remember the Brio tracks, the train tracks. Verse 7, be not wise in your own eyes. Fear the Lord and turn away from evil.

Consequence, in verse 8, healing to your flesh, refreshment to your bones. Verse 9, give to God.

[6 : 22] Honor the Lord with your wealth. And what's the consequence? Your barns will be filled with plenty. Your vats bursting with wine. So you give to God, you receive from God.

And then the final pair, verse 11. My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline. So accept it when God corrects you, challenges you.

The consequence being, well, it's a father who is delighting in his son. So it's actually a sign of his love for you.

Okay, we've gone through it quickly. You can spend more time on it later. But you see, each time we get a call, do this, and then this is what you will get. This is what will happen. We've got a couple of problems that come with that.

Two objections perhaps spring to mind. You might think of others, but two in particular. Firstly, this sounds like the prosperity gospel. Doesn't it? You know that poisonous teaching that says that health, wealth, and prosperity are yours by just following these simple steps.

[7 : 34] Donate now to receive God's blessing. It's a horrible abuse of the gospel, isn't it? And we rightly recoil from that sort of teaching. You know, but then we sit down with these verses and say, well, hang on a minute.

Isn't that what they're saying? Another objection. We might say, well, it's just not true. It's just not true, is it?

Because we think of Christians who we know, or we think of ourselves and our own experience in life. And we think, you know, there are faithful Christians who battle with illness and poverty and relational stress, and it just seems that they're going from one bump in the road to the next. What do we do with that? Are they not really faithful Christians? Am I not really a faithful Christian? Or has God's word failed?

Well, both of those objections, prosperity gospel, and it's just not true. But both of these objections, I think, can be dealt with when we remember that we're in Proverbs. And as we said last week, Proverbs are generalizations, not guarantees.

[9 : 01] And you say, well, that's just a cop-out. You know, you've just explained it away by saying, well, it doesn't mean it in every case. Well, but it's not a cop-out. It's easy to prove that that is what God is saying to us in this part of his word.

Because just think of the Lord Jesus. One never was one more faithful to God. And yet, of course, Jesus had neither long life, nor prosperity, nor peace.

Although he did, of course, grow in favor with God and men. But a booming business doesn't prove godliness any more than bankruptcy proves godlessness.

Generalizations, not guarantees. Okay, but then we say, well, perhaps we can get our heads around that. But in that case, what is the point of them?

Are they not then just full of hot air? Empty phrases. And again, we say, no. Because this is God's world, living his way is best.

[10 : 11] Generally, it will mean a smoother path. A reckless driver might get away with it for years.

A careful driver may well crash. But generally, driving recklessly ends in disaster. Proverbs is all about knocking the recklessness out of you.

It's all about making you live in the way that will ordinarily mean smooth paths. Think about it.

Proverbs 15.1 says, A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Okay, so next time you need to answer someone.

You're in a conversation. You're sending an email. You're talking to your children. Just before you answer, take a breath. A gentle answer turns away wrath.

[11 : 15] Before his downfall, a man's heart is proud, but humility comes before honor. You see, you start to begin to put other people ahead of you and think more carefully about what they need than what you need.

As, of course, the Lord Jesus did. And you find that life is going smoother. You're not finding yourself in that constant antagonism with others or with yourself.

We could go on. But it's this idea of generalizations. And then, of course, again, as we touched on last week, in the light of eternity, those who trust in the Lord do have prosperity.

And health. And long, long life. Calls and consequences.

But what is the call? What are we really being called to here? Well, the call is to live your life every minute, hour and day, leaning on God as if he was there.

[12 : 25] Because he is. Or living with your eyes fixed on Jesus as if he had called you onto the water.

Because he has. And each of the pairs, it tells us to look to him rather than ourselves. Did you see that? That it's all about him, not me.

So, in verse 1, it's about follow his rules, not yours. In verse 3, it's display his love to others rather than that selfish independence.

In verse 5, it's lean on him, not on yourself. In verse 7, it's think more of God than you think of yourself and your own opinions.

In verse 9, it's recognize that nothing you have is yours in the ultimate sense. Everything you have is just on loan from above.

[13 : 25] And in verse 12, it's accept his correction because he knows best. This looks foolish to the world.

Because when we live as if God is there, they think we're like, you know, they're the people on the shore watching us stepping out of the boat. Our world has convinced itself.

In our crazy foolishness, we've convinced ourselves that we are independent and we're self-sufficient. That we are our own independent beings.

And so that any sort of dependence, dependence on other humans, certainly dependence on some sort of God or spirituality is seen as a weakness.

It's the untouchable foundational bedrock of so much of our society. I think. Therefore, I am. But you see, God comes in and he pops that bubble of arrogant pride, doesn't he?

[14 : 29] He says, far from being independent, you are utterly dependent on the one in whom you live and move and have your being. If you want to walk on water, then the crucial thing is not getting out of the boat.

The crucial thing is having your eyes fixed on Jesus. Now, perhaps you're here tonight or perhaps you're watching this at home and you have never believed or even you've never dared hope that you were anything but independent.

Maybe this world has felt like being in a great storm. And you have never thought that you were anything but left to your own devices.

Maybe you feel utterly alone. Maybe you are scared. Well, is God calling to you tonight to say, lean on me?

So there's the call to live our lives as if God is there. What does it look like? What does that look like? What does it mean to trust in the Lord? Some of you have heard of the missionary Hudson Taylor.

[15 : 45] A famous missionary. Well, back in 1853, he was caught in a storm off the Welsh coast. And as all the sailors were running around trying to get the boat under control, Hudson Taylor refused a life jacket.

Dishing out the life jackets, he refused. Because he thought that would betray a lack of trust in God. If God wants to get me through this storm, he will. I don't need a life jacket.

Is that what it means to trust the Lord? Next time you're at the pedestrian crossing, you have a choice. Do you wait for the green man or do you shut your eyes, pray and step out?

Wait for the green man, children. We're not called to a blind trust, are we? We're not called to suspend our critical thinking.

No, we're called to use all our mental and physical resources. And yet we do so recognizing that even when we do that, we are limited. So we recognize our limitations in God's unlimited presence.

[16 : 52] So yes, I look both ways and I listen carefully before I cross the road. But I know that even in doing that, what will get me safely across the road is not my road sense, but is my God.

Hudson Taylor later reflected on that experience and he said this. The use of means ought not to lessen our faith in God.

And our faith in God ought not to hinder our using whatever means he's given us. It's right, isn't it? The use of means doesn't lessen our faith in God and our faith in God doesn't stop us using whatever means he's given us.

So trust God as you do up your seatbelt, as you take your medicine, as you prepare for your exam. Do it all with eyes on him.

But know this. There is no area of your life that you are equipped to handle with your own understanding. No area of your life.

[18 : 03] Think about what it might look like in different areas of your life.

What would it look like in terms of your finances? I was speaking with someone in confidence. It might sound like they were boasting, but they really weren't in the context. But I was speaking with someone and they'd just been with their accountant, kind of going through their accounts for the year.

And the accountant had challenged them and said, you know, why are you giving so much money away? You know, I couldn't get his head around trying to deal with this person's accounts when so much of the money just seemed to be going straight out the door.

Please believe me, it wasn't told to me in arrogance or pride at all. But you see, it looks foolish to the world. If someone looked at your bank account, would it look foolish?

[19 : 22] Would it look prudent? If it all comes from the Lord, every penny, then we want to honour him with it, don't we?

With every penny, we honour the Lord with our wealth, with the first fruits of our produce. Think about what this might look like in whole area of sexuality.

Because that's somewhere where the world says, well, I think, therefore I am. The world says, follow your own rules because you are king, you are God. But you see, when we have our eyes on Jesus, when we are leaning on him rather than ourselves, we're prepared to trust that there is one who is greater.

Whose rules are better. If that's something that's a big issue for you, then go home and read chapter 5 of Proverbs tonight.

Where God warns us about that and shows us that his way is better. With those powerful drives and temptations that you might feel. To know that God's rules are better.

[20 : 46] And so we lean on him. What about dealing with hurt? The world says, don't get mad, get even. Jesus says, love your enemies.

And he prays, Father, forgive them. You see that leaning on God then, allows you to deal with the hurt that comes into your life.

Not because the hurt doesn't matter. But because God is really there. What about dealing with trials that come your way?

Well, leaning on the Lord means that we accept what comes our way. We can cope with it.

Just a couple of weeks ago, we had our first wedding since lockdown in the building down in Lys.

[21 : 53] And it was lovely. It was tiny, but it was lovely. Think about a wedding. We're Christians. We're Christians. We become Christians for better, for worse, richer, poorer, in sickness and in health.

Don't we? When trials come your way, we are those who are leaning on the Lord. And so we deal with them. We cope with them. Because we know that ultimately nothing can separate us from the love of God.

That is ours in Christ Jesus, our Lord. What about dealing with death? Well, we approach death, not with dread or despair, but with that quiet assurance that Jesus has beaten death.

And that our passing from this life will be entry into prosperity and plenty and life everlasting.

Maybe you think of other areas of your life. What would it look like in different areas of your life to really be leaning on him and trusting in him rather than yourself and your own resources?

[23 : 28] Well, how can you tell them? How can you tell where you're leaning?

Have a look again at verse 5. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. You know, American money's got that stamped on every coin.

In God we trust. Is that stamped on your life? Is that stamped on your heart? It's in God we trust. In verse 3, you're binding his steadfast love around and you're writing his promises on the tablet of your heart.

Are you doing that? Are you treasuring his word that you might not sin against him? How can you tell?

[24 : 41] How can I tell if I'm really leaning on the Lord? Well, here's three quick areas. You can tell by your prayerfulness. We pray when we feel out of control, don't we?

Which should be all of the time. It's our prayerlessness that shows that we think we can cope. This is a storm I'll handle on my own.

It's our prayerfulness will tell us. Our motivation will tell us where we're leaning. What is driving you in life? Is it a desire for comfort?

Is it actually you have a burden of guilt? And each of your decisions are designed to try and chip away at that guilt and make yourself feel better. Is really what's driving you to look good in front of others?

Like we were thinking about with Jesus' instructions on prayer. What's your motivation for living a certain way? Is it to do what pleases the Lord?

[25 : 50] A third way, you can tell. Who gets the credit? Who gets the credit? When you think of the successes in your life. Things that have gone well.

Are you proud? Or are you thankful? See, if we're leaning on God, then he gets all the praise. He gets all the glory. He gets all the credit. And listen, we're all a mess, aren't we? We're all a mixture.

We're all fallen. So as you run through those things in your mind and you think, well, I don't pray like I should. I'm constantly motivated by the other things that you mentioned around me.

And yes, I'm always slapping myself on the back when things go well because I feel I've got it through my own understanding. Yes, we're all like that. But friends, we need to be working towards weaning ourselves off those things.

[26 : 56] To lean not on your own understanding, but rather to trust in the Lord with all your heart. Just then, as we close, there's a pub down our way called the Seven Stars.

And they've got beams, lovely old pub, beams up. And on all the beams, they've got modern proverbs, worldly wisdom written on. So you can go and drink and learn at the same time. Here's one that stuck with me. The church is near, but the road is icy. The pub is far away, but I'll walk carefully.

Get it? The church is near, but the road is icy. The pub is far away, but I'll walk carefully. That shows the priorities of your heart, doesn't it? Where's your heart?

Where are you leaning? Are you in the boat with your own resources? Or are you on the water with your eyes on Jesus?

[28 : 13] 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 straight your paths.

Let's pray.