

Stay Clean in a Dirty World

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[0 : 00] I want to ask you a challenging question this morning. How do you face adversity? We've got a number of young folks here this morning and you may not have had much adversity in your life as yet but I can guarantee that's only because you've not lived long enough.

Each one of us will lose grandparents, almost certainly lose parents as well, we'll lose those who are very dear and close to us as friends, often much younger than we would have expected. We will face adversity in terms of perhaps our working life, almost certainly our family life, at a personal level and there may be all sorts of hard providences in our lives that we will have to face at some point.

And indeed, as we've been thinking already this morning, there is international adversity and indeed national adversity in what is happening in our parliaments at this time.

And what this passage speaks to us of is that there is such a propensity for us to faint in the day of adversity that we find that the trials and the troubles of life overwhelm us and we faint, we stumble, we feel completely crushed and overwhelmed by that adversity.

[1 : 31] But thankfully, this passage also has the solution to that, not only in terms of each individual kind of adversity that we face, but also in a much, much greater way.

And indeed, we find here that Solomon says that we can have a very active part in helping others that are facing adversity of various sorts as well.

So let's think first of all of, here's a passage here, I'm just going to be looking at verses 10 to 12, you may be relieved to hear, not the full 12 verses, but we're looking at some of the early ones as well, but mainly we're going to be looking at verses 10 to 12.

So we see first of all here, the need for spiritual strength, because when Solomon says, if you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small. That is a truism, but there's a hint of rebuke there as well.

Is he not perhaps saying that you didn't need to faint, that actually real strength was available for each one of you, if only you had availed yourself of it.

[2 : 51] And thankfully, we do see in these verses next, the source of spiritual strength. And that's there really in the verses 3 to 6, that lovely metaphor there of wisdom being like a beautiful house with lovely, well-furnished rooms, full of precious and pleasant riches.

But I want us to think in particular about verses 5 and 6, because I think we find there three sources, it looks like four, but I think there's really three sources here where we find real spiritual strength.

And we find it wisdom and knowledge, first of all, wise man is full of strength, man of knowledge, enhances his might. And then wise guidance, you can wage your war, and that I think is speaking metaphorically, because if we know our Old Testament, the time of Solomon's reign was a time of great prosperity, very little conflict with neighbouring nations.

So it's probably maybe even thinking of spiritual warfare, even in the Old Testament. Solomon, of course, we know is a man of great wisdom and a great insight into the things of God.

Then lastly, abundance of counsellors, good advice from others. So let's think, first of all, of wisdom and knowledge as the first source of true spiritual strength.

[4 : 14] And we think of that phrase, wisdom and knowledge. Does that perhaps make us think of Paul's language, in particular in Colossians chapter 2, where he says that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in him?

That's the Lord Jesus Christ. So that's the most important thing for us to be aware of and to think in our thinking about where do we find true spiritual strength? It is in Christ.

That means that we need to have a right relationship with Christ. And I'm tying in with what was shared with us earlier from the catechism. And so important for us to realise that we don't have to kind of work towards being accepted by Christ and somehow clean up our act before he'll accept us.

No, he has done all that is needful for us in the gospel, in his perfect life, in his sacrificial death, in his glorious resurrection, and his ascension to God's right hand.

And salvation is indeed in Christ alone. He has won it for us. And in order for us to have access to that spiritual strength, we need to have that right standing with God in Christ, which comes simply through us putting our faith and our hope and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[5 : 25] And as that passage goes on in Romans 3, in particular in his death, that God has set forth for us to hold on to trusting in what Christ has done through his death.

Not only believing in him, in his person as the son of God and as the son of man, fully divine, fully human, but in particular his work of salvation for us. That is essential for each and every one of us. That is what the gospel is, that we believe, that it's what Christ has done for us that will save us, not anything of ourselves. So having that right relationship with Christ is absolutely essential.

So that's the first source that we find. But then next we see wise guidance. You can read, you are. Well, where do we find guidance?

Well, surely it is in the Word of God. It's here, it's in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. That is God's precious gift to us. And we have free access to it, have had for so many years. We think back to the Reformers.

[6 : 24] Think of men like William Tyndale as well, that gave their lives in order that ordinary Christians like you and me could have full and free access to the Scriptures in our own language.

A very, very precious gift that so often we take for granted, don't we? But we need to really avail ourselves every single day spending some time reading God's Word. And from it we will find that wise guidance for all the difficult issues that we need to face in life.

God's Word is surely sufficient for that. But then the third source is the abundance of counsellors. And we know from, in particular, Paul's letter to the Ephesians that God blesses the church with pastor teachers.

And you've been very blessed for so many years here. I think it's over 20 now, isn't it? That Colin, your minister, has been here. And it was such a joy to sit under his ministry at the Murray Coast Convention a couple of years ago.

And that is something that is very precious, the gift that God gives to his churches of capable and gifted pastor teachers where we can learn to understand God's Word better.

[7 : 33] And, of course, we have so much excellent Christian literature as well. We can read further into these matters if we want to. And there's so much good material on the Internet as well, completely free of charge, all these abundance of counsellors.

The Christian Institute, when we were founded nearly 35 years ago, we were very conscious that there wasn't a great deal of teaching, and sadly there isn't still much in terms of literature on all these kind of hotbed, hot potato issues in terms of human identity, morality, sexuality, all these issues.

Thankfully, there's been more in recent years. But for a long time, there wasn't really much at all that was available. And that's why the literature side of our ministry, and as I've seen all the literature we've got there, we hope will be amongst those abundance of counsellors that you will need to navigate all these really, really difficult issues that none of us can escape.

It's there in the workplace. It's there in education. It's there throughout the culture. It's there, of course, now in lawmaking as well. We simply cannot avoid these matters. And it's our hope and prayer that all this free material that we have provided will be the abundance of counsellors for us to stay faithful to the Lord and to his Word in these matters and to know how to navigate these matters as we come across them in our daily lives.

So there's the source of spiritual strength there in verses 5 and 6. But also, so important for us to think as well of the fact that this is not really anything optional.

[9 : 13] One of my favourite verses is there in Daniel 11, verse 32. The people who know their God shall stand firm or be strong and take action.

And he shows that our knowledge of God is never to be passive. It's something that gives us strength. And once we have that strength, we can then take action.

And that's really what we find next in verse 11, what I've called the fruit of spiritual strength. And it's fascinating that we might think that if we know where that strength is for the day of adversity, we'll be able to endure it.

We're not going to faint. And we'll be able to hold strong in our own faiths, simply in our own lives. But actually, what Solomon says next is perhaps surprising.

Because he's saying, well, your spiritual strength isn't just for yourself. Actually, it should have an impact on how you relate to others. And I was just coming across that this week, actually.

[10:20] A verse which I'd never really noticed before in 1 Peter 1. One that really, really did surprise me. Because Peter explains one of the main reasons that God has saved us.

In verse 22, we read, Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love. Love one another earnestly from a pure heart.

Did you realize that one of the main reasons that God has saved us is so that we can love one another? That's what that verse and many others say. So it's hugely important that we realize that this is not an optional part of our Christian faith.

That first and foremost, we are to love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. But we are also to love our neighbors. We are to love those beyond us in the wider world. Indeed, Paul says, doesn't he, in Galatians 6, that as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men.

Especially, but not exclusively, those of the household of faith. So we ought to do whatever we can to help and to love not only our Christian neighbor, but our neighbors in our workplace, in our street, in our families who don't know the Lord.

[11:35] Wherever we have the opportunity to do good, we ought to do so. And here's verse 11, an example of how we show that spiritual strength in actually looking for the needs that others have in their lives.

And in particular, when in various ways, unnatural ways, I would say, they are facing death.

Because if we look at verse 11, it says, rescue those being led away to death.

Well, that sounds like against their will. So that's one of the reasons why we all ought to be appalled at the horrific abortion industry that is there in our culture.

I know it's a very sensitive issue, but we mustn't shy away from it. So many, 10 million lives since the Abortion Act came into force have been snuffed out before they saw the light of day. And that's why it is so important for every Christian to be concerned and to do whatever we can to raise concerns about that issue.

But also, as we're thinking about assisted suicide, one of the arguments, really strong arguments, that has been put forward time and time again is this question of coercion, that elderly, vulnerable people, near the end of their lives, may feel under pressure to go along with assisted suicide because they are, through that subtle pressure and coercion, are being led away to an early death.

[13:01] But also that the second part of the verse there, hold back those stumbling to the slaughter. We know there are many who think that suicide is a great idea. I'm all for it.

You know, the dignity in dying and these other organisations, many, many of the politicians, both in Holyrood and Westminster, at present, a narrow majority, say, yes, why wouldn't we want to choose how and when we die?

But as I was saying at the presentation earlier, of course, this is a complete denial of the Day of Judgment. What utter folly for people to think, great, I'm ending my suffering by opting for assisted suicide.

We know, of course, the opposite is the reality. So these are hugely important matters that every Christian, we believe, at the Institute ought to be taking verses like Proverbs 24, verse 11 seriously, where there's coercion or whether there's carelessness.

Both of those are very good reasons for urging our politicians not to vote for this legislation. Of course, there are so many other applications that we can think of.

[14:10] One of my very good friends from university days, John Gibson, sadly lost his son to suicide five years ago. And he has set up a charity, a suicide prevention charity called the Canmore Trust, and they're taking part in the 10K run today.

And there's an excellent work that he's doing in the midst of all his dreadful grief and sorrow. He is doing what he can to rescue those being led away to death, to hold back those stumbling to the slaughter, that are tempted to take their own lives.

Suicide is a tragedy, whatever age or stage in life that we're at, and it should never be normalized in our culture. It causes so much pain and grief to others, and, of course, never the best option for any individual to go down that route.

So there's a kind of current application. I mean, we don't really know what the context was of Solomon giving this exhortation in verse 11. I think it's almost certainly deliberately vague because it will have different applications in different periods throughout human history.

But there's a couple of applications I put to you within our own context in terms of, well, three really, abortion, suicide prevention, and the assisted suicide legislation. Surely we should all be doing what we can to raise concerns about these important matters.

[15:34] But just lastly, in verse 12, we find Solomon speaks of the folly of excusing spiritual weakness there.

If you say, behold, we did not know this, and it's fascinating that there's nothing new under the sun, as Solomon would later say in the book of Ecclesiastes, that we often try to plead ignorance whenever we're asked to do something or whenever we're made aware of something.

I mean, oh, I didn't know anything about this. Don't blame me. You know, not my problem. That's the kind of attitude that was around in Solomon's day and is so often around in our own day as well. But do you notice that this is such an unusual verse in Proverbs?

It's like a sermon, isn't it? You know, there's this rhetorical challenge that Solomon brings here. He says, does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? He's saying, well, God knows what's in your heart.

You can't fool him. And he's just said, hasn't he? Rescue those being led away to death. So even if that's the first time that these folks have heard that, well, they can't plead ignorance now because they have heard it.

[16:44] And then does not he who keeps watch over your soul or other translations guards your lives? And that's really why we're calling our tour Guarding Lives.

Know it. And I think that the Hebrew is used of both life and soul in a number of other verses. But however we would understand that, that God is the one that gives us life and sustains life, takes care of our lives, every aspect of our lives, both physical and spiritual.

And it is God-like for us as his redeemed image bearers to have that same concern, not just spiritually for our neighbor, for their salvation, but also physically, because it is, you can see the tragedy that is there in verse 11.

People being taken away to death. That is wrong. People stumbling to the slaughter. That is reckless and careless. We ought to do whatever we can to hold them back and to rescue those who are against their will being taken away to death.

And then lastly, most solemnly, will he, will God, not repay man according to his work? I think what Solomon's saying here is that none of us complete ignorance, but once we are aware of a need, whatever that would be, that knowledge brings opportunity to do good, but also responsibility to do good, and ultimately an accountability on the last day.

[18:23] The opening phrase there in verse 12, behold, we did not know this, reminds me so much of the goats in Matthew 25, and actually all three of these parables have a very similar message, don't they?

The, sorry, that's the different slide. God waves their hearts, God guards their lives, and God will judge their deeds. But in Matthew 25, the foolish virgins didn't make use of the opportunity to put oil in their lamps.

The lazy steward in the parable of the talents didn't take the opportunity to make use of what he was given. The goats were oblivious to the needs of others.

Lord, when were you sick? When were you in prison? When did we see you? They're claiming, behold, we did not know this. And really what the message of all these parables in Matthew 25 is that God expects us to make use of both the knowledge and the opportunities that we have.

That's a solemn warning, but let's remember as well the wonderful reward for the wise virgins, those that made use of their talents, and the sheep. Well done, good and faithful servant is a phrase that we would all want said surely at our funerals, and that's there in the parable of the talents.

[19:54] Now, of course, as we were hearing earlier, salvation is not by works. It is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. But it was either Luther or Calvin that said, while we are saved by faith alone, saving faith is never alone.

It will always produce the good works that are exhorted here in passages like this. And of course, that's the closing phrase there, will he not repay man according to his work.

That's how Psalm 62 closes, as we're going to be singing shortly. There are many, many other passages in both Old and New Testament that have that same theme. And we need to remember that we all need to give an account of our lives on the last day, how we have lived, how we have made use of the knowledge and the opportunities that we have.

So I would urge you to think how you can help rescue those being led away to death and hold back those stumbling to the slaughter.

Thank you.