

Wise in a post Christian World

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[0 : 00] We're going to read now from Proverbs chapter 9. So it's Proverbs 9. Wisdom has built her house. She has hewn her seven pillars.

She has slaughtered her beast and she has mixed her wine. She has also set her table. She has sent out her young women to call from the highest places in the town.

Whoever is simple, let him turn in here. To him who lacks sense, she says, Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways and live and walk in the way of insight. Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse. And he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury. Do not reprove a scoffer or he will hate you.

Reprove a wise man and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man and he will be still wiser. Teach a righteous man and he will increase in learning.

[1 : 02] The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. For by me your days will be multiplied and years will be added to your life.

If you are wise, you are wise for yourself. If you scoff, you alone will bear it. The woman folly is loud. She is seductive and knows nothing.

She sits at the door of her house. She takes a seat on the highest places of the town. Calling to those who pass by who are going straight on their way. Whoever is simple, let him turn in here. And to him who lacks sense, she says, stolen water is sweet and bread eaten in secret is pleasant. But he does not know that the dead are there and her guests are in the depths of Sheol.

Good morning. Good morning. Well, will you pray with me as we come to God's word? Let's pray. Yeah, Lord, we don't want to be wise in our own eyes.

[2 : 09] We want to actually be wise. So I pray that you would give us the posture of a learner sitting at your feet, always absorbing your words.

Lord, I pray that you would lead us to the way of life. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, hopefully you agree with me.

I obviously need to add some nuance to this. But Australian society, generally speaking, still very much believes in human rights, don't we?

People talk about human rights all the time. Most people who don't believe in God still want to be treated with dignity and still think it's good to treat others with dignity.

It's good to share our goods, give to charity. And when there's a disaster, we want to rally together and help each other out. That's still virtuous. That we not oppress people and exploit people.

[3 : 12] So people who don't believe in God still see all these virtues as good. I just want to take a moment and look at the basis for those virtues from a materialistic view of the world.

So in someone who doesn't believe in God, there is nothing besides what we can see. So there is no soul. It's just cause and effect. There is no God. Everything is material.

So that interpretation of the world, what's the basis for those virtues? I'm going to borrow an example illustration from Tim Keller.

So he read out this letter that was printed in the New York Times. It's just so short and gets to the point so quickly. I couldn't come up with a better example. So here we go.

Here's what the New York Times printed just about five years ago. So someone wrote in, there are 30,000 galaxies. So we're talking about the night sky here.

[4 : 15] 30,000 galaxies. I thought there was more than that, but someone can correct that later. That are over 13 billion years old with many trillions of stars. And around those stars, many more inferred planets.

Like that's just, you can't even get your head around that, can you? Don't you love the night sky? You just, you can't get your head around that. Here's what this person concluded. So how

significant are you as an individual?

You are not special. You are just another piece of decaying matter on the compost pile of this world. Nothing of who you are or of what you do in the short time you are here will ever matter.

Everything short of that realisation is vanity. Are you feeling empowered to live well? This guy's not being sarcastic.

Let's take an honest view of reality. Here's his conclusion. So, therefore, celebrate life. In every moment, admire its wonders and love people without reservation.

[5 : 38] Full stop. Do you see the logic between your life having no meaning, nothing you do will ever matter, no one will remember what you do, and you should love people without reservation.

I don't see the link. I'm not sure if you can. It doesn't seem obvious. It seems like a very large leap of faith, a blind leap of faith.

So I just want to make two points as we start. The first is, using this illustration, that science stopped when that person stopped describing what's in the night sky.

As soon as they asked, so what does this mean for you, that's no longer science. That's going into a belief system. So someone with a materialistic view of the world has a belief.

They can't prove their belief, but it is a belief. The second thing I want to point out is that to jump to the virtues of we should love one another without reservation, that requires a lot of faith, doesn't it?

[6 : 52] To see the world as nothing you do matters, and therefore I should love you. I should serve you. What's the connection there? Does that work?

Does this view of the world work? So I want to use that to lead into our question today. How do we as Christians live well in a post-Christian society?

And in our society, the popular view is that materialistic view that... And therefore, because there is no grand purpose in life, no grand authority, it's the individual that creates their meaning.

There is no grand meaning, so you create your own meaning and purpose, whatever you decide.

That's the basis for it. How does a Christian live well in this society? It's a very different view of the world.

To put it differently, what does Proverbs, the book of Proverbs, teach Christians about living well in a society that rejects God? Now, I could have looked at individual Proverbs and got advice from there.

[8 : 01] There's probably some benefit in that, but I'd like to take a big picture view of the whole book of Proverbs, which might be fitting that we've got one more. Marty's going to finish off the book of Proverbs next week, so it might be fitting for us to see where we've gone as well.

So stepping back at the whole book of Proverbs, I want to make three points this morning, using chapter 9 as a platform. The first is that every person is putting their confidence in something to give them life.

Ever since ancient times when this was written, there's always been two fundamental choices, putting your confidence in God, in the Lord, to give you the best life or something else, something in creation that will give you life.

So they're pictured as woman wisdom and woman folly, calling out, here, I've got the best life. It's always been the case. People were putting their faith in something to give them the best life.

The second thing that Proverbs teaches us is that God's ways work, and there's a very good reason why they work. It's because God created the world through his wisdom.

[9 : 11] So living his way is in accord with reality. And the third thing I think Proverbs teaches us about living well in our society is that Proverbs exposes that we've actually been foolish, that following the guidance in this book isn't enough to live well.

It actually exposes our foolishness. The book of Proverbs pushes us beyond Proverbs, that we need a saviour. So let's take a look at these few points.

If you have your Bibles open to chapter 9, we'll be mainly in chapter 9 and a little bit of chapter 8. So chapter 9 is the turning point in the book. It's the climax of the first few chapters that have just been imploring you, choose wisdom.

It gives you, it's more precious than jewels. Choose wisdom. If you go down the other path, it leads to death. It's just been nine chapters to try and convince us that we have a choice to make.

Which should probably tell us straight away that we don't naturally choose wisdom. We actually need, it takes effort. And what we're presented with here is a metaphor, two metaphor, two metaphorical women presenting two ways to live.

[10:31] Woman wisdom calling out. Woman folly calling out. So we're hearing. We're constantly hearing this choice and we've got to choose who we're going to listen to.

Both have prepared a banquet. Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed, says woman wisdom. Leave your simple ways and live. And walk in the way of insight.

I've killed the, what is it, the fattened ox. I've prepared a banquet for you. If you come in, you will be satisfied. It is, the drink is wonderful.

It's a party. Come in. It'll be well. But then we've got another choice. Woman folly has also got a banquet for us.

Stolen water is sweet and bread eaten in secret is pleasant. Come in. You will be satisfied. So both are offering a satisfaction.

[11:33] One of them leads to life, but the other leads to ruin and misery. Verse 18. Folly is calling out, but once you go in, you don't realise that in the basement is a pile of dead bodies.

He does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol. So both women are inviting us to come into their house.

So there's a choice to be made. If we step back and think about how the original audience would have heard this, how would an Israelite in ancient times, in the day of Solomon and the kings and afterwards, how would an Israelite have heard what chapter 9 is saying?

They would have heard of it as a metaphor, as we should as well. They would have seen it as a choice between following Yahweh, like the law and the prophets say. If you follow Yahweh, it will lead to blessing.

If you follow the gods of the world, it will not go well for you. So the gods of Baal in particular. So an ancient Israelite would have heard this as really representing God versus other gods of the world.

[12:50] An Israelite would have been confronted with the choice, am I in relationship with Yahweh or am I in relationship with Baal? Who do I think is giving the best life? This choice has been around since Adam and Eve, since the fall.

The choice of disobeying God wasn't presented as, hey, do this and it will suck. It will lead you to ruin. It will really damage you. That's not how it was presented.

It was presented, you'll be wise. You will have the best life. You'll be like God. It was presented as wisdom. It was a false wisdom. And it did end in death.

Death to all of us. So this has always been the choice. It's not like a post-Christian problem is 10 or 20 years old.

This has always been the fundamental choice. How do you live wise in a world where there's this choice all the time? Then the Son of God appears in Jesus and this choice becomes clearer.

[14:00] Do you think Jesus offers the best life or something else? And that choice is ours today. That is still the choice today. Which do you think will satisfy you?

Okay, so that so far, it's quite abstract, isn't it? It's a metaphor. But then Proverbs doesn't stay abstract. It goes very, very concrete, doesn't it? Chapter 10 onwards. We'll come back to this, but chapter 10, verse 1.

A wise son makes a glad father, and a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother. This abstract just goes really concrete. There's a reason for that.

Taken in isolation, these verses could be seen as magic. You plug it in, and your life will go well. Unfortunately, I think a lot of Christians treat Proverbs like that.

We go, okay, I should treat my parents well, and it will go well for me. Is that what Proverbs is doing? I want to kind of go yes and no, and we'll come to the yes later on.

[15:06] But Tremper Longman, a commentator, he really helps in understand what Proverbs is teaching us. He calls them a thermometer, a thermometer of one's relationship with woman wisdom, who is the Lord.

So all these little pithy sayings, which cover a variety of topics, like friendship and speech and anger and justice in the courts and rulers and those who are being led and children and parents and your work and your rest.

Your money, what you think will satisfy, like it just covers all these aspects of life. And isn't that what life is like? It's just all these different aspects that we are confronted with day in and day out.

It's very ordinary stuff. Most of life is ordinary, isn't it? There's not many moments in life where it is a huge decision and you know that one is clearly honoring the Lord, one isn't, and it's going to have massive consequences for the rest of your life.

There's a few of those moments in our lives, but most of our life is, it's rather ordinary, isn't it? Like, will I, I don't know, retaliate to that harsh word?

[16:27] It's a rather ordinary situation. And that's where Proverbs meets us, in the ordinary and shows that it's not just ordinary. They're a temperature of our hearts.

Am I fearing the Lord in this moment or am I trusting in idols in this moment? So I'm going to borrow from Tremper Longman who uses chapter 10 verse 1 as an example of this.

So a wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother. Here's what Longman says. The effect of this proverb and all the proverbs is to lead us to ponder our relationship with our parents.

If I bring joy to my parents, then I am wise. That means my behaviour reveals that I am in relationship with woman wisdom, which means I am a follower of Yahweh. As a Christian, it shows that I am aligned with the one who is the treasure of God's wisdom, namely Christ.

Or we might be forced to conclude, if I bring grief to my parents, then I demonstrate that I am in the arms of woman folly.

[17:42] With a New Testament reading, I am really in league with the devil. Do you see how the thermometer works? If you think about what kind of idols would lead you to grieve your parents?

I could think of a few. You might be able to think of more. But I could imagine the idol of career and making a name for yourself, just consuming all your energies and therefore you basically cut off your parents.

That could cause a grief. I could imagine that the idol of acceptance from peers would lead you to choices that don't please your parents.

So you just must be accepted by your friends. That idol could make you grieve your parents. I could imagine a romantic partner slowly demanding that you cut ties with your parents for their sake, without good reason.

Maybe the idol of needing that relationship could cut you off from your parents. Or then there's the religious idols. Jesus comes down hard on the Pharisees because the Pharisees set up a rule that whatever money and care that you owe your parents, looking after them, as long as you give that to the church, that's okay.

[19:09] You've done your God-given duty. And Jesus slams the Pharisees. That is not okay. Do you see how those idols could make us grieve our parents? So it's a thermometer of the heart, those ordinary situations where we live.

Are we listening to God and trusting his ways or are we in the arms of an idol? But we've got to remember these aren't absolute.

They're not magic. They're not absolute saying. So you could grieve your parents by becoming a Christian, giving your life to Christ. Maybe that grieves your parents. These aren't absolute.

But generally speaking, they tell us, am I in relationship with the Lord or some idol? So why does understanding this fundamental choice in life that we are confronted with concretely, day in and day out, in the ordinary choices, how does that help us live in a world that rejects God?

I think it helps us understand temptation to sin. Temptation to sin doesn't take willpower to choose what's right rather than doing what's wrong.

[20:29] What we're confronted with is two offers of satisfaction for our heart to decide. Which will satisfy you most, the Lord's way or the world's way?

It's not just about willpower. It's a fight for the affections of your heart. So I think understanding this helps us understand temptation. I think it also helps us understand our neighbours who don't believe in God and helps us to have a positive witness to God's ways.

It's not that I have faith as a Christian and someone with a materialistic view of the world doesn't have faith.

They've got science. That is not what's going on. What's going on is we both have faith. Just we are trusting in different banquets to satisfy. Christians, hopefully we're trusting in the Lord, relationship with the Lord to satisfy.

And I suppose the materialistic view is you can do what you want. You can do whatever is right in your own eyes.

[21:38] Is that going to satisfy you? So it helps us understand our neighbours. We don't need to be defensive going, Oh, Christianity is right because of this, this and this.

We don't have to be on the defensive. We can actually ask questions of our neighbours going, Why do you believe that? And just check if they understand the basis of why they believe what they believe.

If we ask that a few times, it might actually expose that maybe they don't have a good reason why they believe what they believe. Why do you believe in human rights? What's the basis for that? We don't always have to be on the defensive for Christianity. We're both coming in with a belief system. But then it brings us to a positive way to be a witness.

And that brings me to my second point, that we can be a witness for God by showing that God's way is best. God's way works. God's way is good.

[22 : 44] It is the most satisfying. That is how Proverbs appeals to us. It is the most satisfying. And that's how we can engage with our neighbours. Proverbs gives us a very good reason why God's ways work.

And that's where we turn to chapter 8, if you want to flick over there. Proverbs says in chapter 8, So this is woman wisdom speaking.

It's in her words. Picking up at verse 27. When he, God, established the heavens, I was there.

When he drew a circle on the face of the deep.

When he made firm the skies above. When he established the fountains of the deep. When he assigned to the sea its limit. So that the waters might not transgress his command. When he marked out the foundations of the earth.

When I look at like Newcastle Beach. Or, or, uh, Nobby's Beach. Like, it's just, wow. That is such power.

[23 : 52] When God was marking out that territory. Wisdom was there. Then I was beside him like a master workman. And I was daily his delight.

Rejoicing before him always. Rejoicing in his inhabited world. And delighting in the children of man.

And now, O sons, listen to me. Blessed are those who keep my ways.

Hear instruction and be wise. And do not neglect it. Blessed is the one who listens to me. Watching daily at my gates. Waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life.

And obtains favour from the Lord. But he who fails to find me injures himself. All who hate me love death. Do you see the reason why God's way works?

It works because wisdom was how God created the world. If you want to be living in accord with reality. Which I hope you do. And like, I don't know if you just want to be living a fantasy life.

[24 : 51] But if you want to live in accord with reality. God's ways is the way. Because wisdom was the one who created it. Or God created it through wisdom.

Now, I've got a pretty hard task right now. And trying to convince you that God's ways are best. And I don't actually think I can. So I'm kind of stuck here.

Like, I've heard of the medical benefits of being the Christian lifestyle. Like, apparently you live longer if you live in community. Like a church. You live longer.

So we can put it up. A sign out front. Come to church. You live longer. I was tempted to go down that route. But to be honest, I can't convince you. And I know I can't convince you that God's way works.

So I'm going to try something. I'd like you to use your imagination. I want you to picture your life. I'm just going to mention an aspect of life. And then I'm going to read a proverb.

[25 : 56] And I just want you to have a think. Would that aspect of your life be better if you and those around you believed what God says? So here we go.

Use your imagination. Imagine you're in a courtroom. And you're before a judge and a jury. And you're on trial for something you know you didn't do.

Would you want people to believe Proverbs 14, 25? A truthful witness saves lives. But one who breathes out lies is deceitful.

I sure would. Imagine you're having a drink with a friend and they confide in you something really personal.

Would this help your friendship if you believe Proverbs 11, 13? Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets.

[27 : 06] But he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered. Imagine you're feeling convicted of your sin before God and you wonder if you could ever be accepted.

Would Proverbs 14, 9? Would Proverbs 14, 9 comfort you? Fools mock at the guilt offering, the sacrifice.

But the upright and joy acceptance. Imagine you're in a heated argument with a loved one.

Would it help if you both believed Proverbs 15, 1? A soft answer turns away wrath. But a harsh word stirs up anger. As you weigh up the values in your family, what will give the best life to your family?

Do you believe Proverbs 15, 17? Better is a dinner of herbs where love is than a fattened ox and hatred with it.

[28 : 17] When you're going through a really hard time, like one of the worst seasons of your life, would you want your friends to believe Proverbs 17, 17? A friend loves at all times and a brother is born for adversity.

Or 1824. He who... Oh, that's not right. A man of many companions... I've got this wrong. No, I don't have it wrong. A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

Would you want that when you're going through a hard time? I would. And I particularly like 16, 31. Grey hair is a crown of glory.

It is gained in a righteous life. Proverbs is true, my friends. It's true. There's a very good reason why God's ways work.

That's because it's God's world. He created the world through wisdom. His ways work. And of course there's Proverbs in here that we've actually just got to take at face value and give it a go.

[29 : 35] Otherwise, we've just got to trust him to see that it works. I think as Christians we can think... We can be afraid or ashamed of our Christian beliefs and the implications for how we ought to live.

Other times we might be seduced by the ways of the worlds, but we've got to remember what Proverbs teaches us. This is God's world. His ways are best for us. His ways are best for our neighbours.

We don't need to be ashamed. We don't need to be seduced. And I think if they don't seem to be working as Christians, we can look to the resurrection of Jesus.

The resurrection, the glory Jesus has now, the joy he has now, that is a huge statement that God's ways work and they work forever.

God doesn't promise a pain-free life, but he does offer the best life. So to live well in God's world, we actually need to listen to what he says.

[30 : 47] The posture of someone who trusts God's ways work is someone who is constantly listening to what God says. And that brings us back to chapter 9, verses 7 to 10.

Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury. Do not reprove a scoffer or he will hate you. Reprove a wise man and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man, he will be wiser still.

Teach a righteous man and he will increase in learning. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

To trust that God's way works is to listen to God. It's that posture Alex was talking about. We sit under God's word. We believe his word. We need it every step of our lives.

[31 : 55] So when we come to God's word, we're not coming to God's word over the top of it to analyse it. We're not coming to God's word beside it to have a discussion. Okay, God, you think this?

Well, I kind of think this. I'll take and leave that. Here's my opinion. That's not a wise posture. The wise posture is under God's word.

Ready to be corrected. Ready to be instructed. So I suppose I want to put it to you. Do you believe God's ways work? That he has created the world?

If you do, you'll be sitting with the posture of someone soaking in God's word. So how are you listening like a child to your father?

Ready to be corrected and instructed. Is the Sunday sermon the only thing you're listening to? Do you seek out the advice of mature Christians?

[32 : 56] Or think a small group. Do you find it awkward when someone corrects someone's comment about what the Bible passage is saying or how they're living? It's a bit awkward, isn't it?

That's a bit confrontational. Isn't that a wonderful thing to have brothers and sisters who will gently correct us and go, no, no, no, this is what God is like. This is the best way to live.

That is a wonderful thing. It's a bit awkward, but I reckon we should love it. It's part of God's means of grace. So living God's world, believing that this is God's word.

I can't get my words right. Believing this is God's world and that his ways of work mean we have a posture of listening ready for correction. So how are you practically having that posture?

So we need to be corrected. And I think that brings us to the third point I want to draw out of Proverbs. I think the book of Proverbs teaches us that the book of Proverbs isn't enough.

[34 : 03] Does that kind of make sense or is that a tautology? I don't know. The book of Proverbs pushes us out of the book of Proverbs because it presents us two ways to live in relationship with the Lord or idols.

It gives us concrete ways to measure whether we're trusting in the Lord or leaning on our own understanding, trusting idols. So we've got a thermometer for that. And yet here's the problem. We've got a clear choice. We can clearly see which way is good. And yet if you're like me, so often I make the foolish choice. Proverbs exposes that I'm a fool a lot of the time.

I deserve the shield, the death that is in the fool's house. To be wise, I've got to admit that I'm actually a fool and I deserve the consequences of a fool.

My foolish choices, other people's foolish choices, just the brokenness of this world, it all cries out for a saviour.

[35 : 17] And I think Proverbs pushes us to go, I need a saviour. It pushes us to be ready for Jesus, that he is the one who took the misery that my foolishness deserves.

He took that himself. It pushes us to Jesus, that he is the one who, like a faithful son to his father, trusted God every step of the way, that his ways were right.

It pushes us to the resurrection, that we do have forgiveness and that his ways do work and do lead to life. Encounter our materialistic friends.

We have those who believe that there is no purpose in life. Far from that. We're told that my choices are far from ordinary and mundane. They show whether I'm trusting the Lord or not.

Far from my life having no meaning. I am known by the Lord. I'm put here by the Lord. Far from being a nobody. The Lord knows me.

[36 : 27] Far from having no hope. We have the resurrection that there is life to come. Far from my choices not mattering.

There will be judgment of my life. My choices do matter. My foolish choices will be covered in Jesus' blood. My good choices will be the praise of Jesus' grace that his love produced the wise choice.

It pushes us to Jesus that we need a saviour. So can I finish with an appeal to those of you who might be listening today who are still exploring Christianity?

If there's even a hint of God's ways working, can I encourage you to explore that further? You might just find that there's something better than doing whatever you want.

And that is a God who loves you. And his way is giving you blessing. And can I finish with the encouragement for my Christian brothers and sisters?

[37 : 40] I don't think we need to be ashamed of God's ways. Because his ways work. His ways are best. But we also should be humble because Proverbs humbles us that we are fools.

But it also pushes us to Christ that we can have confidence that we are forgiven. And that in his strength, by the Spirit's help, we can choose the wise path.

I think it gives us encouragement that we can show the world that God's way is better in the ordinary things we do. In our friendships, in our work, in our play, with our money.

Those are not meaningless. They can show that you are trusting the Lord and his ways are best. Because this is God's world.

Will you pray with me? Let's pray. Father, I pray that you would convince each of our hearts that you are good.

[38 : 58] Lord, I pray that you would convince us of this.

For our sake and for the honour of your name in our society. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.