

God's Way in this World

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[0 : 00] What we're going to be doing over the next five weeks is a short series in Proverbs. I said Oscar, I don't have to shout it out.

Wisdom or health? Wisdom or success? Wisdom or fame? Now, I know they're not all mutually exclusive, but here the question is one of priority, isn't it?

If you had to choose between the two, which would you choose? And as we go through the series on Proverbs, I would hope that you would think wisdom.

So, as I said, we're going to spend the next five weeks looking at Proverbs because it's a book on wisdom, a book on God's wisdom. God's book on God's wisdom.

And today we're going to have a general introduction on the topic. So, I'll fly through actually quite a few ideas. But then over the next four weeks, we will consider wisdom topically.

[1 : 28] That is, try to apply it to individual subjects like friendship or decision making. Jeff will preach a couple and I'll do the rest. Now, those of you familiar with Proverbs would know that the book itself is structured into two parts.

Chapters 1 to 9 contain the longer speeches or discourses on wisdom. And here we would have sons and children of Israel being encouraged by the father or someone called lady wisdom, giving reasons for pursuing wisdom and instructions on how to live by it.

Then from chapter 10 onwards, we have compilations of individual Proverbs. Pithy sort of statements, one or two lines long, which encapsulate wisdom as applied to specific situations in life. So, for the introduction, we will look at a longer discourse today in chapter 8. And even though we read only verses 22 to 36, which will be our focus, the entire speech, you can see, actually starts in verse 1.

And here we hear the voice of wisdom. And because of what she says of herself, she is describing herself and what she is doing, there is a view among some that this actually is a reference or precursor to Jesus himself.

[2 : 59] And so they would connect this passage, let's say, with John's prologue, where, you know, if you, on the next slide, you see, in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God. Or the other passage that we read today, the New Testament passage, Paul's reference in 1 Corinthians 1, verse 24, that Christ is the wisdom of God.

Now, certainly there are connections, you know, word in the beginning, wisdom at creation. But we need to be careful not to conflate both of them just because there's a connection.

Now, and then sometimes they even go further because when they say, all right, yeah, this is a reference to Jesus, then they look at verse 22, for example. They read, the Lord brought me wisdom forth as the first of His words.

Then verse 23, I was formed long ages ago at the very beginning. Or verse 24 and 5, when there were no watery depths, I was given birth. When there was no springs overflowing with water before the mountains would settle in place, I was given birth.

And so they think, oh, if this is a prefiguring of Jesus, then the Son too must have been created, albeit before the beginning of the world.

[4 : 11] Well, obviously that's not true. But even so, I don't think that wisdom here is a reference to Christ, specifically. Yes, God's Son, Jesus, is wise, but He is more than just God's wisdom.

And the verses here portray wisdom more like an observer at creation, right? Somewhat passive, even though, yes, she ends up cheering God on and being filled with delight at creation.

So get that sense when we look at verse 27. I was there when He set the heavens in place, when He marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, when He established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, when He gave the sea its boundaries so the waters would

not overlap its command, when He marked out the foundations of the earth.

Then I was constantly at His side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in His presence, rejoicing in His whole world and delighting in mankind.

So there's not really an explicit suggestion here that wisdom itself was intimately involved in the creation. Whereas, of course, the Son of God was with the Father, intimately involved in creation, as John's prologue says.

[5 : 33] So I think what's going on here is that wisdom is being personified, as I said earlier, to bring out, the reason why it's done, is to bring out her dynamic relationship with creation.

What is wisdom's connection with creation? Now, when we personify something, what we do is that we take an abstract concept, and by giving it a dynamic nature, we are then capable of a two-way interaction, right?

So we say things like, I love wisdom, as though wisdom was a person. Or, wisdom taught me this, like, actually, she was a person teaching. But we know this is all poetic language, right?

If you've done Year 12 English, at least, or literature, you know that this is poetic language. And so we're not to think of wisdom literally as a person, and certainly not as the fourth person in the Godhead, and therefore not a prefigurement of Jesus.

We know from the rest of the Bible that wisdom is one of God's attributes, His quality, shared equally by Father, Son, and Spirit.

[6 : 42] But as I say, she's being personified, not just here, but in the rest of Proverbs as well, but here specifically to help us understand her relationship with creation.

It indicates to us that she actually does play a critical role in it. Not as a co-creator, but looking on the light, because everywhere she looks, as creation comes to being, it bears the hallmarks of who she is.

God's wisdom is written in the very DNA of creation. In fact, God's wisdom is the motivation behind every feature and characteristic of this world.

And what that suggests is that this world is orderly. It's not a haphazard world. Every part of it reflects who God is by nature.

It's just like when you go into someone's bedroom. You can tell immediately that it reflects that person's nature, right? Is it tidy or messy?

[7 : 57] What's the colour scheme? You know, pastel or black and white? What is the choice of furniture? Modern? Antique?

Country style? And then, of course, what are the idols that are on the wall? That tells you, right?

The type of person that they are. You can tell, actually, whether it's a male or female, generally.

And so here, wisdom, she's looking on the natural world to see that that is being conveyed. And, of course, we're talking about the natural world. It's the realm of physics, chemistry, and biology.

Isn't it? And if we were to do the same ourselves, and, for example, as we study and consider the laws that govern our natural world, we have to come to that same conclusion, don't we?

So let me give you a few examples. For example, at the atomic level, we see that every element is... Some of you are doing your chemistry exams. It must be getting triggered.

[8 : 56] But we see every element comprised of the same building blocks, don't we? Neutrons, protons, and electrons. And yet, out of these three, just these three, just by God using a different combination of them, we then are able to marvel, aren't we, at the diversity of this world.

Because every element, every material that we have is a combination, different combination of those three things. From the hydrogen atom, to carbon, which we're made of, to metals, and then to, you know, all the heavy metals, including, for example, I don't know whether it's uranium metal. Anyway, uranium, petroleum, whatever their atomic number is. I don't know, 2, 3, 6 or something. Or, take the law of... That's probably wrong, okay? Don't put that in the exam. The law of gravity, which is the thing which, on the one hand, allows for planetary motion, right?

It's gravity that allows the solar system to keep going round and round. But it's also the very same thing that allows you to be grounded, instead of floating around like debris in space.

Right? One law, and yet God is able to use it for both purposes. Or, for those of you who are doctors, or maybe even others, just consider the anatomy of the human body.

[10 : 14] It's amazing, isn't it? How each part has its particular and unique function, and yet, all of them are made to function by the same system of hormones, the nervous system sending pulses to get it to work, and then also oxygenated by the flow and circulation of blood, as well as other things

besides oxygen.

Now, I could go on, but everywhere we look, and you all have your specialties in whatever you're doing at uni or work, we see order, design, and beauty, don't we?

All of it is a reflection of God's wisdom. But here, even though wisdom is portrayed as a person separate to God Himself, the fact that she is with God at the point of creation also suggests that we're not to conceive of wisdom as though she is independent of God, that you can have wisdom without God.

Because if wisdom is an attribute of God and all creation reflects this wisdom, then all wisdom in this world is from God.

Everything in this world is a result of God's wisdom. Everything that occurs is a reflection of God's wisdom. Even though, strangely, there is evil and folly in this world.

[11:46] Of course, folly is opposite to wisdom, and yet, even the presence of evil and folly is part of God's wisdom. Folly and evil are able to subsist within God's overall matter wisdom, as I call it, in order to serve His purpose even though evil and sin are not part of who He is.

If ever you want to ponder on that mystery, that's something that boggles the mind, and yet, that is true. The other thing to note, of course, is that because wisdom is there at the beginning, it's not to say that wisdom only came to being at that point, because we know that God's wisdom was from all eternity, isn't it?

And so God was already wise even before creation. But the point of what is being said there is that it is only at the point of creation that God's wisdom is made visible and tangible.

That's why the passage talks about wisdom being brought forth, or given birth, or formed, because it's not like wisdom did not exist, that God was not wise before that, but that it was hidden and only brought to light and displayed in all that God does in creation.

So, as another analogy, take, for example, a famous composer, your favourite one, take a peek.

I've just randomly chosen Beethoven. The question is, he's a genius, right?

[13:22] Was he a musical genius before he wrote his first composition? Now, okay, I know he was a baby at one time, didn't know anything about music, but as he was growing up and learned music, was he then a genius before he first wrote his piece of music?

Now, of course, yes, right? But that genius was latent and only was given expression when he writes that first piece of music, right?

And so, it's the same with God. He's always wise from eternity to eternity, but creation is the evidence and the expression of that wisdom so that even us who are part of creation, we can look on what he's done and we can delight in it.

But such wisdom, of course, is not just confined to the physical realm, even though that's the focus here in chapter 8, I want to say that God's wisdom is, as I say, evident in everything, including in the relational and moral realm in this world, right?

Not just about physics, chemistry, and biology, but also in our relationships and in God's morality.

So, if you look at Genesis chapter 1 and 2, we're not just given an account of the natural world, God made this, God made that, but we also learn of the ordering of relationships and there is wisdom in that.

[14:52] So, things like what it means to be male and female and why we created male and female. God's design for marriage is between a man and a woman. The nature of a family, what it means to cleave or leave and cleave.

Human relationships with creation, how we are to rule and subdue. The world's relationship to God, the nature of work and rest.

All of these are actually found in just those two chapters, 1 and 2. And then, sadly, of course, when we get to chapter 3, we see how humans try to subvert it and therefore sin.

And not only is God's wisdom intrinsic to that design for relationships, He also explicitly gives us instructions so that we can see and understand how those relationships ought to work.

This is what we find in the rest of the Old Testament and the New Testament as well. Codified, for example, in the Law of Moses with the associated ethics that go with it. God's instructions that are based on His wisdom for how He created the world is reflected in His Word.

[16:05] And so, if you want to understand how God works in this world, then we need to read God's Word and understand God's laws. And in reading them, of course, we know as well, we begin to understand and come to know who God is.

And we come to understand that alongside this idea of wisdom, not alongside, but intrinsic to the idea of wisdom, actually, is the concept of right and wrong. Something is right, not because God arbitrarily made it so, but because it's consistent with His nature.

And something is wrong because it's not consistent with His nature. And so, you know, the rules that God gives to us in the Word is not there just to restrict our human freedoms.

It's there to show us, actually, how He has created this world to function and therefore, we ought to live in line with it. The upshot, of course, is to say that wisdom, then, is not morally neutral.

Wisdom is not just a clever way of doing things. It's not a philosophy of life that, you know, brings you personal advantage. You choose what you want and whatever advantages me, I'll choose what I want.

[17:19] No. Wisdom is God's intended way for how His world needs to work. And that's why we all have this innate sense of truth, justice, and righteousness.

Because to the next point, these things actually reflect God's wisdom. And as a society, we desire that everyone lives by those principles, right? We want truth and justice to be upheld.

We want people to do the right thing. And actually, everybody believes in this, right? Because otherwise, there's no point going to a protest.

Did you realize? You only protest because you believe that there is a right way of doing certain things. And while everyone may not agree exactly on what this truth and justice looks like, no one actually argues or should argue that there is such a thing as truth and justice which we are all trying to uphold.

Well, in chapter 8, wisdom tells us that if you want to know what these things really are, then what you need to do is listen to her and gain it from her.

[18:29] That is, gain it from God's wisdom. So, look at verse 6-8 which we didn't read. She invites us, listen, for I have trustworthy things to say. I open my lips to speak what is right.

My mouth speaks what is true for my lips detest wickedness. All the words of my mouth are just. None of them is crooked or perverse. Or if you go down to verse 20, I walk in the way of righteousness along the paths of justice.

Those three words we've been using. But of course, as I said earlier, because God's wisdom is not independent of God, when we seek God's wisdom, what we really need to seek after is God Himself.

Because true wisdom can only be found in God. And so, the other common refrain that keeps coming up in Proverbs, like, for example, chapter 9 and verse 10, is that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Fear meaning the worship, the reverence of the Lord, is the beginning of wisdom. Why? Because coming into right relationship with God is the only way that we will discover true wisdom in this life.

[19:38] And then finally, let me jump to the New Testament because when we get to Jesus, we find that if God's wisdom is found in knowing God, then the way to do this now is through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Because as I say in my bullet point, God's, in Jesus Christ, what we find is the embodiment of God's wisdom.

And it's at the cross that we find the epitome of the same. Let me go through that 1 Corinthians passage quickly then because Paul firstly says, no, that is God's wisdom but initially, or firstly, we need to actually realize that God's wisdom is actually quite subversive and hidden, a bit unconventional even.

It's not always obvious to the ordinary human mind that God is wise. In fact, the opposite is true, he says in verse 18. The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.

Now, of course, Paul's not saying it's truly foolish because the very next thing he says, it has the power of God to save. But to the perishing, the cross makes no sense.

[20:55] Even though in verse 24, he again declares, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than the human wisdom or human wisdom.

And the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. Now, as I said earlier, this verse here is not then making wisdom in Proverbs 8 a reference to Christ.

Why? Because notice that the word that Paul uses is Christ, the power of God. He doesn't use the word Jesus. Christ is the title given to Jesus.

And he does that because he's not just referring to Jesus the person, even though he's wise, nor is he indicating the incarnation of the second person of the Godhead.

By using the title of Christ, he's trying to signify God's purpose of salvation achieved through the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one who's come into this world to save the world through the cross.

[22 : 01] So this single word Christ actually carries an entire narrative, which we find in the Bible, of God's salvation history. Christ, the wisdom of God, really is then just a shorthand for saying Christ crucified, the message of the cross is the power and the wisdom of God.

And it's when we ponder upon the meaning, the message, the significance of this amazing act of Jesus dying on the cross that we see God's wisdom displayed in all its power and glory.

But we need to ponder deeply because at first glance, it is foolishness to those who are perishing. For them, if you look at the cross, it's an abject failure, isn't it?

If you didn't know any better, you would say so, wouldn't you? How can God's king die? A shameful death, seemingly defeated by evil.

That's not wisdom. That's failure. That's disgrace. That's weakness. But no. You see, if after now, what I've been saying is that God's wisdom is displayed in creation and then God's wisdom is imparted through words in His Word through the law, it's only when we finally see God's wise and eternal Son become Jesus.

[23 : 37] The Word became flesh, as John 1 says, that for the very first time, we see God's wisdom fully embodied in a human being.

We see for the first time someone who is able to live perfectly God's way in this world. Right? Up to now, God's given all this, you should do this, you should do that, but nobody can do that.

It's only when Jesus comes that we see fully what it means to live wisely. And also, we see what God's wisdom truly is.

That actually, deep in the DNA of God's wisdom is the fact that it is actually cross-shaped. That's why in Christ, we see not just truth, but grace.

We see that the world needs not just justice, but mercy. Or as the song goes, it's at the cross where justice and mercy meet.

[24 : 39] Not justice in opposition to mercy, but together, justice and mercy, fully displayed by God, so that we see not just God's righteousness, but God's forgiveness at the cross.

It's where we see that even though evil and sin does its very worst to the Son of God, it is also there that it is defeated by God's righteousness and wisdom.

Now, if you're not familiar with that word, epitome, to epitomize is simply to be a perfect example of something. And so, when I say that the cross is the epitome, what I'm saying is that it is the perfect example of God's wisdom.

It encapsulates all that we need to know about God's wisdom. And so, if you really want to understand God's wisdom, we need to reflect deeply on the cross.

What happened there? Why did it happen? What was God achieving through it? Why did He do it the way He did? Because once we begin to understand these things, we begin to truly appreciate God's wisdom and how God works in this world to achieve His end.

[25 : 50] It is not conventional wisdom, but wisdom that is cross-shaped. Then, for example, we see that pride and self-righteousness is actually folly, right?

Because earthly wisdom says, if you want to live well, you know, you just need to know right from wrong, right? Get all the principles and the rules straight and then go and try and live by it.

But actually, God's wisdom, true wisdom, says that's not enough because if you think you can do it in your own strength, that's foolish pride. Which, in Proverbs 8, verse 13, wisdom says, she hates, I hate pride and arrogance.

Instead, true wisdom realizes humbly that they cannot do it alone, that they need God's grace and mercy, which comes when we believe and rely on His Son, Jesus.

And then, it's only after that that we can live in light of that, in light of that truly wise perspective and then be successful.

[27 : 01] And that is why we hear right at the end, verse 32 to 36, wisdom calling out to all who will hear. And she says three things.

So firstly, now then, my children, listen to me. Blessed are those who keep my ways. Listen to my instructions and be wise. Do not disregard it. Here, she's imploring people to listen and learn God's

way, including the way of the cross, because that's the way God created this world. Live according to how He designed it, how He ordered it, and how He ordains it. And to be honest, there is no other way, really, even though there is a choice here that she gives us. Because, just like the laws of nature, we can't actually defy any of God's laws even if we try. Now, many of you are familiar with Moomba, yes? You'd love to go to, I'm sure. And you've no doubt seen the Birdman Rally on the next slide. Yes? Anyone participated? No?

[28 : 08] Very wise. Well, if ever there was a good example of people trying to defy gravity, that is it, isn't it? I mean, they're doing it for a good cause, they know they're not going to succeed.

But, did you realise that even the plane that successfully flies from Melbourne to Sydney has not actually defied gravity, the laws of gravity, right?

You may think, oh, you know, the bird, the plane, they all defy gravity. No, they haven't actually. the pilot needs to actually take account of the law of gravity in order to successfully fly from Melbourne to Sydney.

To take off and to land safely actually requires the engineer that designed the plane to understand the law of gravity and to work with it rather than to defy the law, right?

And that's the same with all of God's creation. We cannot defy God's order and design for this world. We may think we can and for a time appear to be successful if we live at odds with it, but ultimately God's wisdom will prevail.

[29 : 24] And that's why wisdom says, come, keep her ways, because ultimately that is the only way to know God, to worship Him and to live in dependence on Him under His wisdom.

And the second thing then she says is that that requires a commitment of daily dedication. Blessed are those who listen to me watching daily at my doors and waiting at my doorway.

I love that image, isn't it? Sitting there, waiting, you know, when's wisdom going to come out and give me something and expectant? And that's how we ought to have that posture day by day, isn't it?

When we're in relationship with God, God's Spirit dwells in us. We have God's Word to be our counsel. And so as we live and walk through life, our approach should be as I'm facing this or that, Lord, God, what is your wisdom for me in how I might be living or applying your wisdom in this life? We want to know not just what God wants of us, but also how to apply in the right situation and to have the right motivation for it, the right heart and attitude.

[30 : 33] And wonderfully, as we keep doing that in life, as our relationship with God grows and our wisdom grows, and God's wisdom in us grows, we too begin to act and say things that reflect who God is.

God's wisdom almost becomes part of us. The more we are like Jesus, the more we too will have God's wisdom. So that, you know, we're not always, oh, here's a situation, let me pull out my checklist and work through, did I, whatever, whatever.

But actually, as you approach situations in life, God's wisdom will give you that sense in which you know right from wrong because it's part of who you are now.

And therefore, you will also have the heart to do what is right, not wrong, because that is who you are as well. So as I say, I want to say it again, wisdom, if you are seeking wisdom, is not a bunch of clever ideas or ten tips for doing this and six principles for doing that.

Rather, wisdom begins with a fearful relationship with God so that we can begin to see the world through God's eyes because that's how he made it and then respond rightly to it.

[31 : 55] And then finally, Lady promises that if we do that, we will find life instead of death. For those who find me find life and receive favor from the Lord. But those who fail to find me harm themselves.

All who hate me love death. This life is found firstly in following Jesus and seeing God's wisdom in the cross. But then, after that, choosing to live the same way, a cross-shaped life.

And so to the questions at the very start, yes, we may need to forgo wealth, health, success, or freedom, or fame, not because ultimately it will disadvantage us, but because when we choose wisdom, we will find life.

Instead, when we choose health, wealth, and success and make decisions based solely on that, we may not ultimately find what we're looking for, life. Instead, wisdom says, all who hate me, that is, hate God's wisdom and don't heed by it, actually love death.

So really, even though wisdom has given us a choice, it's not a take it or leave it, is it? It is really a matter of life and death. My prayer is that we choose wisdom in life, wisdom in Christ, wisdom in the cross, and find favour with God and live.

[33 : 25] Let's pray. Amen. Father, thank you that you have revealed to us your wisdom, found not just in creation, but most gloriously in your Son at the cross.

Help us to daily wait at your doors to learn from you, learn your ways to live according to it, and therefore find life and favour for eternity.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.