

SUMMER 5 - An Old, Reliable Woman

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Date: 26 January 2003

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 26th of January 2003. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled An Old Reliable Woman and is based on Proverbs 8.22-9.18.

Well, let's pray. Our God, we thank you that you speak to us through the words of Scripture, words of wisdom for us, not only wisdom for living in this world, but wisdom to make us wise for salvation.

And we pray that you'll speak to us through these words tonight, that indeed we may be wise. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Have you ever noticed how noisy the city streets are when you walk through the city streets?

There's a bustle of competing voices. There are the invitations to come in and snap up the bargains. Usually men or women standing with a little portable speaker outside a door and trying to get you as you walk past to come in.

[1 : 22] Walk in, ladies, and save hundreds of dollars on all this jewellery. A new suit, sir, for you. Save lots of money. There are the voices of protest in the streets as the city as well.

Peace, not war. Save the whale. There are the voices of beggars. Can you spare a dime? The voices of prostitutes. Have you got the time?

The voices of tourists saying, Isn't Melbourne nice? The voice of street preachers, Turn or burn. And the voices of children bawling their eyes out.

In Proverbs, in these first few chapters, in the city streets, there are two voices that really matter. Last week we heard one of those voices.

The voice of smooth words of seduction, words of enticement and flattery, surreptitious, covert, lurking in the darkness, the whispers of temptation, appealing to our senses, to our desires, to our greed, to our pride, offering to scratch where our ears are itching, inviting us to sin, to sex, to greed, to power, to idolatry, to laziness, to wealth, all the things that the book of Proverbs warns us against in detail in later chapters.

[2 : 49] Well, that was last week. But there's a second voice. And this is the crucial voice. It is public. It is upfront. It is allowed.

It is bold. It is at the crossroads. It's in the marketplace. That is, it's the places of decision. It is at the places of business.

And the person whose voice this is, is obvious yet often ignored. Not instantly attractive. As you're walking through the bustling city streets, you probably wouldn't turn an eye because of her glamour.

She's an old, old woman. Does not wisdom call? And does not understanding raise her voice?

On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads, she takes her stand. Beside the gates, in front of the town, that is the marketplace, at the entrance of the portals, she cries out.

[3 : 46] In this city, there are both voices offering their wares. Both voices appealing for a following. Both voices offering advice.

Whose voice do you heed? Who would you choose? The glamorous, gorgeous, doled up one, whose lips are dripping with honey? Or the old woman?

Not so obviously beautiful. Proverbs chapters 1 to 9 goes to lengths, as we've seen in recent weeks, to urge us, to compel us, especially those who are young, to be careful.

To choose carefully whose voice you follow. To be alert. To avoid wrong paths. And to heed the right voice. Why choose the old woman?

For she doesn't discriminate. Her voice is for all people, young and old. To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live. Without exception, she's not fussy.

[4 : 5 6] Her voice, her command, her invitation, is for each and every person. Whoever they are, wherever they're from, whatever their background, whatever they look like, whatever their desires are, whatever their frustrations are, whatever their experiences are, whatever their faith is or isn't.

This old woman calls to each and every one. But especially to those who are foolish. Those who are naive or ignorant.

Those who are inexperienced in life. Not only to them, but especially to them. O simple ones, learn prudence. Acquire intelligence.

You who lack it. And she offers what is noble and what is true. So we read on in verses 6 and 7. Here, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right, for my mouth will utter truth.

Wickedness is an abomination to my lips. And what is true here means what is reliable, what is trustworthy, what can be depended upon.

[6 : 0 0] That is words that offer some promise, but a promise that will be realised. Not words like in chapter 7, smooth words, that promise much but deliver nothing.

These words are reliable, truthful, trustworthy, and what they offer will be delivered. They will not let you down. You know as well as I, I'm sure, that when you walk down the bustling city streets or down a marketplace, and somebody is offering to sell you their wares, more often than not, they look pretty dodgy, cheap, imitations of the real thing, fallen off the back of a truck.

Don't touch it with a 40 foot barge pole. Unreliable wares, most probably. But these gifts and offers from this old woman are reliable, trustworthy, can be depended upon, and will deliver what they promise.

And unlike the devious and deceitful adulteress of chapter 7, wisdom's words are straight. Verses 8 and 9. All the words of my mouth are righteous, there is nothing twisted or crooked in them, they are all straight to one who understands and right to those who find knowledge.

That is, there's nothing deceitful or devious about them. The words of the adulteress, the smooth words we saw last week, they're crooked, they're twisted and warped.

[7 : 3 3] They say they're pointing you in a direction to offer you the pot of gold, but actually they're leading you astray, down dead ends and cul-de-sacs of death.

But the way of wisdom is a straight way. Indeed, it's an easy way, as the book of Proverbs makes clear, and it leads to a glorious destination of life.

During the Second World War in eastern England, in the counties in the east of England, they decided to turn around all the road signs, because they were fearful that if the Germans landed, it would give them too much sense of direction.

So they turned them all around to try and disorient these Germans who might yet land in England. I'm not sure whether any Germans ever did land there, and if they did, whether they ever got confused. I could imagine all the people of England getting fairly confused, let me say.

But there's nothing, no hint of deviousness or deceitfulness here from these words from Lady Wisdom. Her words are straight, clear, direct. They point in the right direction, and they'll get you to where they point.

[8 : 39] Not like those smooth words we saw last week, that promise much and deliver little, that are crooked and don't actually get you to where they say they'll go. More than that, wisdom's words are worth more than silver or gold.

Verses 10 and 11. Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.

Will you think how strong the attraction to worldly wealth is in our world today? The popularity of Tats Lotto and Kino and gambling, so we're all glued to it on TV or must get our tickets in or our bets on.

Think of the greed in our workplaces, people who are out to get a little bit more, willing to strike for a bit more money. Think of the greed in our litigation in our society, people who see any little loophole in the law that might give them a court case that will land them hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars.

Think of the desire for better and better education so that we can earn more and more money. Think of the gullibility in our society that so many people fall for the Nigerian email scams that promise you millions of dollars if all you do is send your bank account number to this unknown address in Nigeria.

[10 : 04] They will deposit millions in your account that you can use. How gullible we are because how greedy we are to get worldly wealth. But wisdom says here that better than all the worldly wealth that you could desire or imagine is the benefit of Lady Wisdom and her words.

More to be valued are they than gold, even much fine gold. Better than silver. Better than all the jewels in the Tower of London. Better than all the money that you can imagine Bill Gates has.

Wisdom is worth more. Now wealth itself is not wrong. We need to be clear about that. Indeed sometimes wealth is a clear sign of the blessing from God.

But it is the desire for, the love of, the greed for wealth that is clearly wrong. Indeed idolatry in the end. And that is desperately wrong.

You may have seen an article in Yesterday's Age about the Hillsongs Church and how it is a gospel of prosperity and how they're on about making people rich.

[11 : 19] Give so you can become rich is the way they seem to be operating if indeed the article can be believed. At best I have to say from what I've read it is perverted Christianity if it is Christianity at all.

It is an attempt as they deliberately said in this article to satisfy itching ears. I wish they'd read 2 Timothy 4 where itching ears lead you astray and not down paths of wisdom and truth.

It is not the gospel. Prosperity is not the gospel. Itching ears are always attracted to the adulteress' smooth words of chapter 7, the promises of wealth.

And they turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to the old reliable lady wisdom at the crossroads. It is a foolish mistake, a fatal mistake if we pursue that wealth and prosperity and somehow think that it is God's way.

It is a lie. It is a deceit. But our world is greedy for richness and wealth and itching ears will quickly lust after the temptations of smooth words.

[12 : 38] Wisdom is worth more. The wisdom of God is worth far more. For when this heaven and earth are rolled up at the end of history and pass away, where is our wealth then?

But the benefits of the wisdom of God last forever and are worth pursuing. Even if they make us not worldly rich now, don't fall for the lies and the deceit of the promises of wealth and think it is God's way.

Well, Lady Wisdom continues her crossroad appeal in verse 12. I, Wisdom, live with prudence and I attain knowledge and discretion.

And then comes a clear contrast again to the smooth words of the adulteress of chapter 7. The fear of the Lord is the hatred of evil, pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech.

I hate. You see, the smooth words are perverted words. They don't deliver what they promise and they lead astray the wrong way. And indeed, they're words that foster pride and arrogance because they flatter people and somehow seem to puff them up with their pride.

[13 : 57] Not at all. The words of wisdom, the way of wisdom, is to shun such evil and instead to pursue the fear of the Lord. Notice the moral component about wisdom here again.

As we've seen every single week, wisdom's not about being clever. It's not about having an IQ that means you can be a member of Mensa. Wisdom is moral behaviour, right behaviour, upright behaviour.

It's about fearing the Lord and doing what he commands and what is therefore right. And notice too that wisdom is not indifferent to evil. It is not simply, do you want evil or rather choose good?

It is hating evil, verse 13 says, detesting it, abhorring it, loathing it, which is something the New Testament makes clear is for all Christians. Read Romans 12 onwards, for example.

I have good advice and sound wisdom. I have insight. I have strength, she goes on to say. Notice the emphasis on I, lady wisdom speaking.

[15 : 01] That is, it's an exclusive way of speaking. She's not just saying, I've got good advice and sound wisdom and insight and strength. Over the road, there's somebody else who's got good insight and strength.

Take your pick. She's saying, if you want insight and wisdom and prudence and intelligence, if you want the way of God, if you want what is straight and right, if you want insight and strength, I and I alone have it.

The others may pretend they're false things, they're imitations. Beware of them. It is an exclusive claim that is being made here by lady wisdom. And notice too, she doesn't just have insight and wisdom and knowledge and so on.

She also says at the end of verse 14, I have strength. That is, often we know what is right but fail to do it. Lady wisdom is offering us even more here.

Not just the ability to know what is right, but indeed the strength to do it. Not just the advice but the strength also. Indeed, so significant is the offer of this lady wisdom that even kings rule by her, she goes on to say in verses 15 and 16.

[16 : 13] By me kings reign and rulers decree what is just for by me rulers rule and nobles all who govern rightly. Well, of course, Solomon writing these words was a great king and famously wise.

What he's saying here is being bound by the wisdom of God. Even kings, even rulers who in the ancient world were often quite autocratic and basically made up their own laws as though they themselves were gods to be worshipped and often they were.

But Solomon is saying as lady wisdom is saying here that wisdom is so important and so significant that the wisdom of God overrides kings and rulers and nobles.

Under them the wise king rules. She goes on to say in verse 17. I love those who love me and those who seek me diligently find me.

I love those who love me, she says. Compare that to the faithless adulteress whose smooth words were so enticing in chapter 7. The one whose husband was away on a business trip and said come on jump into bed with me.

[17 : 21] Where's the love there? It's just sex and playing around at night. Here is real love being offered by lady wisdom. A faithful love. And notice too how the words of lady wisdom not only in the beginning of this chapter seek us out but the flip side is we must seek her diligently and thus find her.

Yes, the two are true. The words of wisdom do seek us out. God after all is a seeking God. He doesn't play hide and seek with us and hide himself in some wardrobe somewhere waiting for us to find him.

As God seeks us out he wants us to seek him out and he promises that whoever seeks diligently will indeed find him and find lady wisdom and find her words and by them live.

And she goes on in her appeal on the crossroads of this city riches and honour are with me enduring wealth and prosperity. My fruit is better than gold even fine gold and my yields more than choice silver.

I walk in the way of righteousness along the paths of justice endowing with wealth those who love me and filling their treasuries. Oh, you're wrong you're saying to me. Here is the promise of wealth worldly wealth surely being offered by lady wisdom.

[18 : 41] It is real wealth but it's wealth beyond worldly wealth. This is wise wealth. The wealth of wisdom itself and filling our treasuries with her wisdom and words is storing up treasure in heaven that will last.

Competing voices the confusion of a crossroad both are making promises which way to return. The smooth words scratching our itching ears the old woman's words of wisdom on the other side.

Whose voice do you heed? Do you go straight ahead or turn left or turn right? Well, lady wisdom goes on now to give her credentials. Why should we listen to her?

Why are her words wise? Why shouldn't we go after the smooth words of the adulteress? They're much more attractive and much more appealing. Why choose this old woman's words?

Well, she may not be young and gaudily dressed as we saw last week. She is old. Indeed, she's ancient. But she's reliable.

[19 : 50] And you see, she says, I was there. I was there. I know. You see, lady wisdom's reliability as the voice for us to heed and follow is because she was there.

She understands the world in which we live because she was there when it was made. Not only as a witness to it being made but as an agent for making it. So if you want to understand the world, if you want to understand life and its intricacies and complexities, listen to me, she says.

Because I saw it. I understand it. I was there. If you want to be wise in this world, heed my words because not only was I there to see it, but I was the master builder.

I helped lay out the foundation and I rejoiced with the Creator when it was all done. And if you humans want to know what is best for you in this world, listen to my words.

Because I was there, I helped make it, I saw it being made, I delighted in it being made, I understand how it was made and I give you the Creator's instructions. If you want to comprehend the complexities and intricacies of structures of life, follow my words in this book.

[21 : 12] These are the Creator's instructions. And you see, the creation itself, the world in which we live, is a manifestation of the wisdom of God because He made it by wisdom. And despite the fall of humanity into sin and the depravity in which we live and the confusion and decay of this world as a result, despite all of that, there is wisdom to be found in this world which God has made by wisdom.

Indeed, the wisdom of this book which we read is not just Solomon's profundities, not just Solomon's experience of life recorded for us. This is God's wisdom in the end. It is therefore rightly an inspired word of Scripture because God is the source of wisdom and God is the source of this book of wisdom.

And thus, God, the Creator, is the authority behind Lady Wisdom and her words and thus also the authority behind the book of Proverbs. So Lady Wisdom is saying here in this chapter, you can trust my words because I was there and my words of wisdom are the Creator's words of wisdom and He is their source.

And she's saying, I may be old, indeed I'm so ancient I was there before anything was made. I was there before the darkness and light were separated. I was there before the dry land and the water was separated and land was formed.

I was there. I'm that old. But I'm reliable and trustworthy and I'm conveying to you the wisdom of the maker of it all. Smooth words may be seductive but they are deceptive.

[22 : 50] The adulteress's words may scratch but they will not satisfy. And you can run after all her foolish glitter that my wisdom is worth much more than gold.

See what she says then in verse 22 onwards. The Lord created me at the beginning of His work the first of His acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up at the first before the beginning of the earth.

When there were no depths I was brought forth. When there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped before the hills I was brought forth. When He had not yet made earth and fields or the world's first bits of soil.

And there is a reflection on the order of creation in Genesis chapter 1. When He 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 limits so that the waters might not transgress His command. When He marked out the foundations of the earth Then I was beside Him.

[24 : 01] Again reflecting the first chapter of the Bible. I was beside Him like a master worker. Not just watching ignorant and confused.

I was there as the master worker. The one who helped bring it into being. If you want to know how all this works. If you want to know how life works and the world works.

If you want to know the path of wisdom through it all. listen to me. Because I was there I know and I'm reliable. And at the end of it all I was daily His delight.

God's delight. The Creator's delight. Rejoicing before Him always. Rejoicing in His inhabited world and delighting in the human race. You see at the end of each day of creation God saw what He'd made and it was good.

And at the end of the sixth day the final day of creation God saw everything that He'd made and behold it was very good. Fit for its purpose. Working order.

[25 : 02] And there's a sense in the end of Genesis 1 when God says those words that He's rejoicing and delighting in all that He has made and the pinnacle of what He's made which He's just made at the end of the sixth day is humanity.

And now we find that it's not just God on His lonesome rejoicing and delighting in it all but Lady Wisdom delighting with God in all that was made and rejoicing and delighting in the human race.

If you want to understand what it means to be human in this world that God has created listen to me. My words are reliable because I was there and I helped and I rejoiced.

She's given her credentials that's her CV if you like. It's her character reference it's her authority for saying what she says in this chapter and so she urges us again to listen to her.

Listen my children she says in verse 32 happy are those who keep my ways hear instruction and be wise and do not neglect it.

[26 : 08] Happy is the one who listens to me watching daily at my gates waiting beside my doors. In chapter 7 the adulterous woman beguiled us with her smooth words her promises so tempting so attractive.

Lady Wisdom not so beautiful in some respects perhaps not quite so tempting her words offered to us here in this chapter.

Whom do we listen to? This is not an unimportant question. It is not a matter of choosing whether you buy your clothes at David Jones or Myers or somewhere else.

In the end that doesn't matter. But this question does matter. Which voice which invitation which command which voice do we listen to? The smooth words of chapter 7 or the words of the old reliable woman?

It's a crucial choice because it's a life and death decision. For whoever finds me lady wisdom finds life and obtains favour from the Lord.

[27 : 28] but those who miss me who follow after the words of chapter 7 who follow after the words of the adulteress the smooth words whoever miss me injure themselves and all who hate me love death.

Pretty important decision. Life or death. On the surface both a promising life and glittering prizes along with it. But only one ends up at life.

Only one way is straight. The other veers well off course and ends in death. Our world is full of competing and confusing voices. differing ideologies differing philosophies differing religions differing points of view differing appeals to get rich quick differing enticements to look after yourself first different lures and different lusts different ways of making fun number one different paths to promising wisdom whom do you listen to?

You will face such decisions regularly in life there are daily crossroads of decision making as well as the major junctions of life the big decisions as well.

Whom do you listen to? Fools follow fads fools follow flirts and flings fun and feasts fashions fullness and fortune but all of them are fleeting and all of them are fatal but wise people follow wisdom's words what is honourable true just pure and pleasing words that come from God and wise people follow the wise one because the voice from heaven said listen to him the same voice of wisdom here is the voice of God and the voice of the wise one the son of God and wise people follow the wisdom of the cross of Christ crucified which our world thinks complete following but indeed is both wise and strong for salvation if you want to make sense of this life wisdom is found in God in God's voice and in listening to God's son and following his death on the cross for us it is not a blind obedience the book of Proverbs is wanting us to have a wise obedience to think on these things to mull them over to chew on them to reflect on this world and on life its complexities and intricacies to think on these things daily at every crossroads and every decision and to heed the voice of lady wisdom and choose life