

The Hinge for Life (Evening Service)

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[0 : 00] Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening. In Christ's name, Amen. Hello! It's so nice to see you all. My name is Aaron, and I'm the minister that looks after this service. I'd love to meet you if you are new. Come and say hi.

So, let me just give you a big overview picture here. So we're two weeks into a series looking at Proverbs, and this week we're looking at the introduction to Proverbs. Proverbs, if you weren't here last week, we were in chapter 20, but it would pay to listen to that sermon, I think, if you weren't here last week, because it gives a lot of background information to Proverbs. So let's get on with it here.

Let's say you had a boss who you really disliked, and they were aggressive, and they were condescending, and you thought, okay, how do I deal with this? And you thought, okay, well, perhaps I could have them murdered.

Perhaps I could kill them. It's an option, right? Let's totally just kill them. Now, the Bible has something to say about this, actually. So it frowns upon them, and what you'd go is you'd go to the law of the Bible, you'd go to the Ten Commandments, and you'll see that it says, do not murder. So let's say you still have this boss, so you've taken murder off the table, but you still have this boss problem.

So what about the prophetic books? How do they help you? Well, there's not a lot of help in there for dealing with unpleasant people. Isaiah, Revelation, Isaiah. I mean, you could go through a lot.

[1 : 31] There's not, basically, this is what makes Proverbs so good, okay, is it deals with all this daily life stuff that sort of slips between the cracks of the rest of the Bible. Like the law doesn't tell you how to deal with criticism, right? There's no parenting advice in the prophetic books.

Revelation doesn't help you decide which job to take, but Proverbs does. It sort of occupies this very unique space, and we should be very grateful for it, because we do actually make like a million decisions a day, and we make good ones and bad ones.

And sometimes these bad ones can really blow up on you. So we need help. We need help to make these daily decisions. And Proverbs says, right, okay, so you want help making decisions? You want to make good choices, not bad choices? Proverbs says to you, what you need is you need wisdom. And gaining wisdom, well, that's the big idea of Proverbs.

Proverbs says, what is wisdom? And the way it defines wisdom, it's very clever. What it does, it sort of piles up these synonyms on top of each other. So we see the word wisdom, we see instruction, insight, wise dealing, prudence, knowledge, and it's saying wisdom contains all of these things.

So we'll look at a couple of these very quickly just to sort of expand on this idea of wisdom. So that word introduction there, verse 3, it's actually quite a, in the Hebrew, it's quite a stern word, actually. It's a word of chastisement. It implies that people are saying hard things to you. It implies that, how does it help us? Whatever wisdom is, it's hard one. It doesn't come without pain. It doesn't come without people saying difficult things to you. It doesn't come without ideas bumping up against what your heart thinks. What about insight, verse 2 there, what's that all about? Insight, in the original language, is all about seeing fine distinctions in a situation. The subtle differences, the subtle distinctions in a situation. So I love Sherlock, as I'm sure a lot of you do, the British Sherlock, and I love it. He walks into a room, and the grey-haired copper says, well, all I've got for you is there's a body, and there's a knife in his back, and Sherlock kind of looks around, and he sees like a jelly bean on a mantelpiece, and he sort of goes, ah, you see? The murderer is like a one-armed Argentinian, or something like that, and then he sort of explains it all, right? He's got, so that's insight. That's insight. Prudence. Prudence is, it's a wonderful word, prudence, isn't it? It's cunning. It's being streetwise. It's practical wisdom, and

[4 : 48] I think we'll skip the others for the sake of time here. So if you wanted to kind of mush all of those ideas together, all these synonyms, right, for defining wisdom, if you sort of mushed them all together, here's a good definition of wisdom that comes out of it. Wisdom is life competence. Wisdom is life competence. Real life, it's complex, and wisdom is the ability to work out what's the best thing to do in the majority of situations. So you see there what it does, what that definition does, okay, those synonyms. It actually distinguishes wisdom from intellect, and that's helpful to know. It distinguishes wisdom from just intellect.

So I went to a high school that was heavily streamed, and what that means is that you sit some exams before you enter the high school system, and at my particular school, which was a very different sort of school to most schools, you're put into a class according to your intellect. So let's say, we use different numbers, but we'll say eight, okay, so you enter school at grade eight. So all the smartest 20 kids were in 8A. The next smartest 20, 8B.

Next smartest 20, 8C. All the way down to O. So this was a big school. It was a big school. It was a grammar school. And each year, you sat three sets of exams, and you would go up and down classes, depending on how well you did in those exams. End of the year, they'd produce a book, because they'd stream within the classes as well. So in 8D, for example, you were ranked in that class. So the end of the year, you'd produce a book with everyone's names. Smartest kid, least smartest kid. Brutal. A brutal system.

And I remember speaking to a teacher of, I wasn't in the smartest class, because I know you all think, I wonder what class he was in. I was kind of like, I know what you're thinking. I was up, but I wasn't right up. So that's, in case you're curious about that. So anyway, so I remember speaking to a teacher of the smartest class. I said to this teacher, oh, wouldn't it be amazing to be that smart like those guys? And I'll never forget this. This is like 30 years ago. I remember him just looking at the ground, just shaking his head. And he said, these guys can't tie their own shoelaces. And he sort of went on and sort of talked about it some more. And he basically said to me, the real world is going to eat these kids alive.

So you can be really smart and a fool. And you can be really wise and not an intellectual champion. You know, because you can know lots of stuff and be foolish because wisdom is about how you respond to all the stuff you know, how you use all the stuff you know. So wisdom in the Bible distinguishes itself from intellect. What about morality? Does it distinguish itself for morality or those things related? Because you can be really wise and not have a high IQ? Can you be really wise and be sort of immoral? Well, no, you can't be that. If God made the universe and we disobey him, that's not wise. Plus, verse 3 actually does talk about the wise person being concerned about justice and equity. So the wise are moral. But wisdom's a lot more than morality because wisdom is about dealing, also dealing with the parts of a life where morality doesn't apply. Like what job do you take? That's not a decision of morality. Okay, let's move on. So we've been talking about defining wisdom. I'll give the final word here to Bruce Welke. He's regarded as the sort of the world authority on the book of Proverbs. He says this,

[8 : 41] The possession of wisdom enables humans to cope with life. The possession of wisdom enables humans to cope with life. So let's learn some more about this wisdom. So now, who is wisdom for? Who can receive this wisdom? Well, in Proverbs, verse 4, it says, talks about the simple and the youth. Now, the simple, who are they? They're an important character. We'll meet the simple again quite a few times in Proverbs. The simple are not intellectually deficient. They're people who in Proverbs are a bit naive, a bit inexperienced, perhaps a bit willful. They haven't done anything really dumb in their life at this point, but it's on the cards. It's coming down the pipeline, unless they learn wisdom. When I think about my old youth group, and this was a sobering thing.

There were some people smarter than others, some people more moral than others. But sort of, you know, 30 years later, I think about the old youth group, all of us were simple. All of us were simple, inexperienced, just kids, right? And some of us became fools, some of us became wise. And of my sort of, you know, 30 or so people that I remember quite vividly, I think probably about 20% of them have made terrible relationship decisions, and have made their life very difficult for themselves. One person became a sex worker, another person went to jail for manufacturing methamphetamine. Another guy became basically sort of a hermit. These are just, now this wasn't some crazy youth group I went to. This was a middle to upper class church, quite like St. John's, in a very nice neighborhood in Auckland, in New Zealand. Now there were external factors involved in this, but basically how these people, you know, shipwrecked their lives. One big aspect of this was

foolish decisions. Now that sounds very heavy, and the reason I'm sort of, I tell you that is because I just don't want you to think that wisdom is this optional extra for your life. It's vital. It is vital. It's especially vital if you're young. It's especially vital if you're inexperienced in life.

If you have ever played Dungeons and Dragons, you will know how to make a character in Dungeons and Dragons. And I'll tell you a bit about it if you haven't, okay? So it's this kind of role-playing game. You make a character, there's classes like fighters and monks and clerics and wizards and stuff, but you have these character traits, and the character traits are intelligence and dexterity and constitution, strength, charisma, and wisdom. And you kind of roll dice to see how good you are in all these different things, right? And in the game, if you want to be a fighter, you can have quite low wisdom, but you've got to have high strength and you've got to have high constitution if you're going to survive as a fighter on an adventure. And that works great for the game. You're killing it if you're playing Dungeons and Dragons. But in real life, people without wisdom are not just unfortunate.

It's not just, oh, well, they're good at other stuff. You know, they're really good at sports. And I mean, they're at law school. They're at medical school.

[12:08] They're going to be an engineer or something. You know, oh, they're very clever. They've always done well on exams. There's family money. They're just, they're going to be fine. No, no, they won't be fine without wisdom. Without wisdom, you can ruin your life. And I think that's what the gang example right at the end of the passage makes clear. Wisdom is not an optional extra for our life. It is vital, vital, vital. So wisdom's for the simple. Proverbs says, you desperately need it. But you also see there in verse five, it says, let the wise hear and increase the learning. So gaining wisdom is a lifelong project. It's not just for the simple. It's for all of us. We never stop learning wisdom.

No matter how old you are, no matter how wise you think you are, you never stop learning wisdom. And King Solomon, the author of Proverbs, is a fantastic example. Why is this guy on the Bible? Why is this guy on the land? And this is before Christ came along. And he had everything. And the Bible says, tells stories about people who come from all over the world to see him. And there's these great stories about Solomon making these really cool decisions in difficult situations. And the guy put his name to Proverbs, right? But his life ended up ruined. He tore apart the kingdom. How did that happen? He stopped learning. He stopped following wisdom.

So I say that because I don't want you to sit here and go, oh, Aaron, I'm so glad you're here to say that to the kids. They need to hear it. No, you need to hear it as well. Wisdom's for all of us.

The moment we get off the wisdom train, we're in trouble. So we've talked about what wisdom is. We've talked about who it's for. Next thing. How do we get it? Hope a soldier on the idea you really need this. How do we get it? Verse seven. This is probably the key verse in the whole book of Proverbs.

[14:08] The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instructions. Great passage. The kind of thing you should memorize. What does it mean, though? What does it actually, like, it's great, right?

Oh, yeah, fear of the Lord. Brother, the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord. You need to do it. What is it actually saying?

And how does it work? Like, what is the, like, how do these things build? Like, how does it actually work? Well, okay, first of all, the fear of the Lord. And you probably know some of this answer. It's like, fear is, is like reverence and it's awe. However, when we talk about the fear of the Lord, what can come to mind is like, well, I fear people I don't trust, you know. That's not what it's speaking about. Although some people do, some Christians do fear God because they think God is going to punish them. And so they obey God out of a, sort of a negative fear. They think God will harm them. That is not right. That is, you do not have a grasp on the gospel of Jesus Christ if you are, if you have a negative fear of God. So what is, this fear is different. It's not that. I don't know if you've ever met anyone you really revere.

You know, some of you have admired for years and years and years. You meet them and you don't want to say anything stupid, right? You're in such awe of them. Tourism New Zealand produced a series of very long advertisements for our country a few years ago called the Lord of the Rings.

[15:40] I don't know if you saw those. It was a trilogy. Each ad was like three hours long. Tons of actors. Incredible, actually. There was like a whole story attached to them. It was amazing.

New Zealand made a lot of money out of those. So there's a guy called Christopher Lee who's one of the actors and he played a character called Sauroman. So you know him, right? The Lord of the Rings.

Sauroman. So when he heard that they were making a movie, he immediately contacted his agent and said, I want to be in on this. And he wanted it. He tried out for Gandalf, actually, but he was too old to play Gandalf. The reason he wanted in on the Lord of the Rings was because he was a lifelong fan of the books.

I read a little biography of him. When he got out of the Air Force, 1945, he read The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings for the first time. And he read them every year for the rest of his life. Now the reason I tell you that is because he is the only actor in the movies who ever actually met Tolkien. He actually met him. He was young and he was at a pub with some friends in England and Tolkien walked in and he was with some students and the students knew him as a professor. And some students said, Professor Tolkien, come over here. Christopher Lee said, he goes, when Tolkien came over, I was so overwhelmed I actually knelt before him. When you're in the presence of somebody you so dearly revere, I mean you tremble and it's a positive thing. You don't want to grieve them. You don't want to bore this person. You don't want to offend them. And goodness, you certainly, you don't want to do anything that would dishonor them. This is, the Bible describes this as fear, but it's a fear that's all about love. It's based on a great love. That's what verse 7 is trying to get at. But, so, so, if the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, we've talked about the fear of the Lord, but how does that actually lead to wisdom? What's the mechanics of it? How does it work? I'll just, I'll give you some examples, okay?

So, a fool, what's a fool's problem? A fool's problem is this. Verse 7 says they despise wisdom instruction. So, a fool's problem is this. They're talkers, not hearers. They're not learners. They're not humble. They care too much what others think. They care far too much what they own think, what they think about themselves. They're experts in their own minds at everything. And it's just symptoms of the big issue, is they don't fear the Lord. So, what difference would it make? What change would it make if they feared the Lord? Well, examples here. You know, what if this joyful fear of the Lord overcame them? How would that lead towards them? Some examples. If your main concern is what the Lord thinks of you, then what others think of you, it won't be as important. When you care so much about what others think, you make foolish decisions, don't you? You lie. You act out. You make decisions to please others, not the Lord. If you care less about what others think of you, because you care more about what the Lord thinks of you, that's going to address some of those problems, I think.

[19:00] You'll be a wiser person. Another example. If you know that you're deeply loved by your heavenly Father, you won't operate out of a place of insecurity, which many of us do. If you always feel like you have to defend your honor, you know what? That could be, you're operating out of insecurity in your life.

See, insecure people feel like they always have to be right, so they quickly get into arguments, and they quickly get into a fight. The wise, they fear the Lord. The wise are more concerned about the Lord's honor than their own, and they're willing to choose peace over their own honor. That's what wise people do. Another example. If you know that there is a God and you are not him, you know, you'll be less inclined to exert power over other people. So often people who don't acknowledge the sovereignty of God or the existence of God have a great need to be the captain of their own destiny.

They want to control everything. They want to control everyone around them. That's the foolish life, isn't it? The wise don't feel that need. The wise interact with people a much healthier way.

So that's, those examples, trying to get at the idea of why the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Okay, so we've talked about what wisdom is. We've talked about what it's for. We've talked about how to get it.

And it's the fear of the Lord. That's the first half of our chapter. The second half, I think it puts some meat on the bones and it says, let me tell you a story. In fact, let me tell you a couple of stories. And the two stories are two invitations. First invitation is this. Listen to the instructions of your mother and father. Now the mothers and fathers here are probably going, finally, finally, somebody's saying it. Well, let me just tell your children now. Children, it doesn't mean you do everything your mom and dad say, all right? I'm sorry. Parents. These are idealized parents right here. These are idealized parents. So you do all the wise things they say. But if they ever get off, ever get off track

and they tell you to do something crazy, you don't have to listen to that.

[21 : 10] The principle basically is this though. It's using the situation of idealized parents to say this. Do the hard work of learning from people that are wiser than you. And in 99% of the situations, it's going to be your parents.

Or if you're older or if your parents aren't in your life, it's going to be people that are older than you that you respect. Do the hard work of learning from wiser people than you. That's the first invitation.

The other invitation is this. Second invitation is to run with the gang.

They promise, what do they promise? They promise community. Verse 14, be one, you can be one of us. Be part of our community. They promise a great sense of power over other people. It's great temptation, isn't it? They promise houses filled with plunder. I knew a guy that was a burglar.

People tell me you'd go to his house and there'd be like seven vacuum cleaners in the living room and like six blenders just lined up on the mantel. It's the promise. So much stuff. Oh, I think of all this stuff and the power you'd have and you'd have community. Then the simple person hears this call and goes, and it's so compelling. Easy money. Become a person to be reckoned with. Be one of the gang or stay at home and watch Dancing with the Stars with mum and dad. What do you want to do, right?

See, this is, it's talking about a literal gang of robbers and proverbs, but for us, the gang could be workmates. It could be guys at country club, sports team, school friends. It's any community that makes promises to you and your heart says, oh yes, I really want that. I want that more than I want to honor Jesus. That's the gang of robbers here. And verse 17 to 19 says, folks, this is vanity.

[23 : 05] It says, this way of life, this rejection of God's wisdom in verse 19, what it says there, it says, this will take life from you. It promises so much, the plunder and the power and all that, but it actually takes life from you. Now, what does it mean that? What does it mean that it actually takes life from you? Well, to make sense of that, I want us to look at it.

I want us to look at this idea of proverbs and wisdom within the context of God's created order. So I want us to go back to Genesis just for a couple of minutes and then we'll finish. So we're in proverbs, but now we're going to go to the big picture here. Think about Genesis, seven days of creation, right? Days one to three, we'll stay away from day seven. Days one to three, what happens? God separates. Big word in days one to three, God separates. God separates, separates, and he forms the world. Days four and six, what happened? God fills. He fills it with living things. So one to three, creating these physical boundaries. Four to six, about blessing and life. And the point is this, where we live, boundaries and blessing belong together.

Life and boundaries belong together. And that bumps up against what culture says, I think.

Blessings exist. Life exists within God's boundaries. We'll look a bit closer just to convince you here.

One to three. Again, separation is a very important word in Genesis. God separates light from darkness. He separates waters from waters. He separates heaven from earth, water from land.

All about separating and making boundaries. Four to six, God separates first, and then he fills it with life and goodness and well-being. This bounded sort of place he fills with fish and animal and birds and people, and God is with him, and it's wonderful. That's the big picture here, okay? God's blessing and life are given within boundaries that God has made. And what does our culture think of that?

We live in a culture allergic to boundaries, allergic to limitations. Our culture wants to rise above these kind of tired old ideas of good and bad, to be free to sort of reject or embrace what we want, free to define our own identity outside of creation, outside of religion, outside of culture.

[25 : 17] We want to be free from a limiting God, from a limiting community, and we resent people who tell us there are limits and boundaries. That's the cultural air we breathe, and sometimes Christians, we breathe it in. We're infected by it. God created these wonderful boundaries, and the foolish part of our hearts can be embarrassed by those boundaries. We resent them. And yet, within these boundaries, that's where life is. The Bible gives us an example of what happens when God removes those boundaries.

The flood. God separated water above and below. What happens when God removes that boundary, that good boundary, because life exists there, right, where that boundary is. When we remove that, what happens? It's the flood. God broke that boundary. There was no separation from waters above and below, and the result was death and curse, right? That's a very heavy sort of theological response to the question of why wisdom works and why foolishness does not work, because God created the world in a certain way, a bounded world. And when we fear the Lord, we

operate in that world with wisdom, a place where there's life. And when we don't, we want to bust out of it, because we want our own way. We want our own honor. That's the way of the fool. That's spiritual death. So what we're doing in Proverbs here is, it's not a study so that you can make lots of money.

It's not a study so you can be successful. It's, or to make you nice to people. I'm hoping those, that would be great if those things happened to you. But we study the book of Proverbs because it works on the preposition that, or presupposition that this is God's world and he knows how it works. And God puts us two, puts two paths before us. And one contains life working within the boundaries that God has created. And one the other way is spiritual death. So let me say a couple of things before I finish here. If you are living foolish, a foolish life, I'll say it like this. If you are explicitly doing foolish things, I want to warn you. It would be remiss of me not to warn you.

Two things. You could get into real trouble. You could shipwreck your life if you continue to do foolish things. But mostly I want you to know that, I want you to grapple with the fact that you are dishonoring God when you do foolish things. Secondly, if you don't sort of feel like, oh, there's not these explicit sort of foolish stupid things that I'm doing, you know, like.

[27 : 53] But perhaps for some of you, in your decision making, God is just not on your radar. You're not tapping into the wisdom of God. I mean, you pull them in for the big stuff.

A death in the family, relationship breakup, you know. But mostly you do your own thing. You just sort of do your own thing. That's spiritual laziness, folks. That again is, that's foolish living. For both of you, here's what I want for you. I want you to know the forgiveness of God through Jesus. I want you to read the Gospels and know that God loves you and that he died for you and that he forgives you of all the foolish things that you do. I want you to know the joy and wonder of God's grace. But I also want you to know that you need to move out of that way of living and move into the way of life. And the way that's going to happen is, I want you to know about the holiness of God. And so I'd recommend maybe reading something like Leviticus or Isaiah chapter 6. Because that's the key to wisdom. Developed a great reverence of God and live out of that. Folks, that's the way of life. Amen.