

The Hinge for Life

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, as we open your word, we believe in the Holy Spirit, and so we ask that you would give us knowledge and prudence and discretion, that we'd walk the path of wisdom in the fear of your holy name, and we pray this in Christ's name.

Amen. Well, welcome. If you would open your Bible to Proverbs chapter 1, page 5 to 7.

This is our second week in the book of Proverbs. We tried out Proverbs 20 last week, and not everyone made it to shore. So we've gone back to the beginning.

It's a very good place to start. Particularly after yesterday, about 150 of us met with Phil Long, and Phil took us through a lovely overview of the book of Proverbs.

You'll see in the bulletin that the sermon title is The Hinge to Life, and that's because of chapter 1, verse 7, which is the key to the door of Proverbs.

[1 : 06] If we don't get this key, we don't get verse 7, the rest of it's not going to make any sense, which was why it's such a clever idea for me to start in chapter 20. So here, verse 7, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

Fools despise wisdom and instruction. And what that means is that everything in this book centers on God. That all the wisdom language and all the advice and all the commands are not a list of rules to be obeyed or principles to be mastered.

They're not a series of New Year's resolutions which we're going to fail with. The book's about the long-term character growth that comes through making decisions that relate to God.

The fear of the Lord, it's not getting it right morally or intellectually or socially or religiously. It's growing in reverence and worship and appreciation of God.

Okay. And you'll see in the first verse that Israel is mentioned, but it's the only time Israel's mentioned in the book because this is for all of humanity. And when we come to the New Testament, New Testament writers take the words of Proverbs and apply them straight to us as Christians, followers of Jesus Christ.

[2 : 27] And the way it's set up at the beginning in chapter one here is their words from a father to a son. You see verse four? To give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth.

Bruce Waltke, who's an Old Testament expert, has written two commentaries on the book of Proverbs. I didn't tell you earlier service this. He actually wrote a commentary on the whole of the book of Proverbs.

Not convinced that they were connected together. And as he studied the book of Proverbs, he changed his mind. The book was about to go to print.

And so he held it off print and he spent 10 years, 10 years writing another commentary. And how glad we are. It's two volumes. They're about this thick each.

And they're absolutely fabulous. I highly recommend them. As doorstops. No, no. No, no, no.

[3 : 29] They're the best. Best thing out there. He calls the simple, the gullible, the morally brainless. That's in an academic volume.

The morally brainless. But here's the thing. It's not restricted to the young. It's for everyone who knows they've got something to learn. It's for all of us who think, well, maybe I haven't arrived yet. And the idea of the son, the youth, is someone on the threshold of making big decisions. Setting out on a journey where the decisions can lead to either life or to death.

And the picture of being young is perfect because that's the time. Everything's sexually volatile and financially all over the place. And there are all sorts of voices calling us.

And as we go through the first 10 chapters, there are two primary voices. Voices that call. Woman wisdom. And woman fool. And they're not just individuals.

[4 : 32] So they speak through individuals. You'll come to see individuals. But they're calls to two different paths. The path to wisdom and life and blessing. And the call. Well, it's really a seduction.

The promises of easy sex and easy money. Thinking about the now. It's the path to death. And wisdom and foolishness are not feminine.

Nor is the father and son meant to be gender specific. So just look at verse 8 for a moment. Hear, my son, your father's instructions and forsake not your mother's teaching.

The Proverbs put the father and the mother on equal footing. And the deepest concern for both father and mother is the spiritual welfare of the children. So while the speeches often come as a posture of father to a son, a domestic talk, the mother is very important and she comes up at the really pivotal points of the book.

It's very interesting. Chapter 10, chapter 1, at the end and more. And the idea is the child is not named. And so it's for everyone who thinks of themselves as a child, every adult, everyone who's more mature.

[5 : 47] And the reason I'm saying this is to lead up to there's a whole network of images and pictures. They're very picturesque. But one of the most important are the two ways, the two roads.

Just look down at verse 15 for a moment. Their feet, the sinner's feet run to evil. They haste to shed blood. And the father says, don't walk that way.

There is a way that is good and there is a way that is evil. And you and I are caught in a fundamental choice of love day by day. To choose to love that which looks attractive but corrupts and kills.

Or to choose what is truly beautiful and filled with life. And this idea of the way comes more than 75 times in Proverbs. The reason is because we're never stationary.

We're always walking. You are a different person than you were this time last week. And every decision we make heads us in a direction. Either the path of life or the path to death.

[6 : 51] And the decisions that we make are full of consequences. By our deeds, our destinies are decided. That's the point. Which is terribly helpful for us in this cultural moment of fiercely competing worldviews.

Which voice shall I heed? And the two ways remind us of the fact that in creation, God formed everything.

He made everything and he put boundaries. And then he filled those boundaries with blessing. So that there is a way of blessing in life. But it's within certain boundaries.

And the temptation to this road is to go outside the boundaries all the time. It's very culturally wonderful. You know, everyone loves it. And of course, we have a Lord and Savior who says, I am the way.

And so walking that way is walking with him. So I want to make two points. Let's dive into the passage. I want to make two points. The first seven verses, with seven as the pivot, I've called the way of wisdom.

[7 : 55] And the second point, I've called the way of the world, verses 8 to 19. All right? So the first half, verses 1 to 7, the way of wisdom. And I just want to read verse 7 again because it's so important because it unlocks the door.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction. Is this the way you think about your life? Do you think about yourself and your friends in terms of the fear of the Lord?

This is a really important question because this phrase comes up more than 300 times in the Bible. It's deep and vital. It's one of the most important expressions in the Bible. You know, the fear of the Lord is a key to growing as a Christian and growing as a church.

In the book of Acts, when Luke is writing, it wants to describe God's blessing on the church. He says this in Acts 9.31. So the church throughout Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

In the book of Isaiah, when Isaiah prophesies the coming of Jesus Christ, you know what he says? He says that the coming of the Son, this is what he'll be like.

[9 : 18] His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. And when the Apostle Paul in Romans comes to, winds up everything that's wrong with the world and explains why we're under the judgment of God, the very final thing he says at the end of that list is, there is no fear of God before their eyes.

But I'm aware it's very easy to misunderstand the fear of God because there are two different kinds of fear. There's a terror, cringing dread of God.

You know what it's like? When I was in high school, I was in military cadets and we used to go away on these hellish camps. I should tell you some stories about that some other time.

But if you had a leader, you know, a young lad who was a year or two older than you and he was unstable as a person, it was awful. And we all lived in terror that suddenly they'll do something terrible to you.

That's one kind of fear, but that's not the fear of the Lord. In fact, the Bible draws a line between that sort of terror and anxiety and the fear of the Lord as a good thing.

[10 : 31] When God appeared to Israel on Mount Sinai, the book of Exodus, it was genuinely terrifying. Remember the descriptions, the ground shook. The mountain shook.

There was smoke and fire and trumpets and blazing lightning as the God of all the earth drew near. And we read in Exodus 20 these words.

When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled in fear. That's this fear. Listen to what Moses says.

He says to the people, Moses makes a distinction between this terror sort of fear and the fear of the Lord.

The fear of the Lord is not the kind of fear that makes you want to run away. It's the kind of fear that invites you in and makes you want to run toward. It's not being frightened of an executioner.

[11 : 46] It's that lovely fear that a three-year-old boy has of his dad or his mum who he really looks up to and just wants to please the parents.

That's the sort of fear. And it's based out of love. In Psalm 130, we read this. If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

None of us can stand before God because of our sins. But with you there is forgiveness that... Does anyone know how it goes? You might be feared.

Fear comes out of... This kind of fear of the Lord comes out of forgiveness. It begins with a realisation of the free grace and mercy and glory of God. That though we deserve the opposite, he's provided a way.

And his character is that he bends over, ready to give us blessing and goodness and grace, and he wants to draw us in. He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve. He treats us as we don't deserve.

[12 : 49] In tender love. And the holy God, who sees all our failings and our bad decisions, he sets his love on us. And he turns his face toward us and away from our sins.

And calls us to embrace him through forgiveness. Where he shares his life and... This is the fear of the Lord. It's the beginning of wisdom. It's the beginning of real change.

So, where does it come from? Well, that's why we're in Proverbs. One of the places it comes from is from heartfelt prayer. As you'll see in chapter 2.

But in verses 1 to 6, there's this lightheartedness about it. It just tells us why Proverbs is written.

And it's chock-a-block of good stuff. I count 14 positive promises in verses 1 to 6 of what the book will give us.

To know and to receive and to understand and to give and to increase. It's for grasping and getting and gripping and growing in wisdom, which comes from God.

[13 : 55] And wisdom, as you know, it's more than cunning or cleverness. It's more than intellect or intelligence. It's using all our abilities in the fear of the Lord.

Each of our decisions, thinking through... It's harnessing our insights and our experience and all that we can to deciding what is best. Some people call it life skill.

To live on God's path and to live God's way. Not to be swept off the life. It's to live the good life as God sees it. And the beginning of that life and the middle of that life and the end of that life is the fear of the Lord.

And these words in Proverbs, knowledge and insight and prudence and discretion, they're not IQ words. They're relational words with God. But in our choices, we make choices in our relation with God and in relation with others.

Because the fear of the Lord touches every area. Ah, but you're saying, yes, yes, yes. But last week you said to us that we have this fabulous innate capacity for self-deception.

[14 : 57] And we do. When it comes to seeing ourselves in our hearts and seeing God in his heart, we are not morally or spiritually neutral. And outside the fear of the Lord, we're hardwired to make

foolish decisions.

And there's a couple little hints of this. So in verse 2 and verse 3, the word instruction assumes we've wobbled off the path. It's a word of drawing us back into the way.

We need to be set right. We need to be brought back and takes humility before the word. Or look at verse 5. That the wise hear, the wise hear and increase in learning.

And the one who understands obtain guidance. And we increase in wisdom as we increase in the knowledge of God. So it's not just for the young or beginners. I hope none of us think we reach the place where we don't need any more growth in the fear of the Lord.

If you think you've reached that place, come and talk to me. I'll convince you otherwise. That's why the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

[16:02] It's not the beginning in the sense we start with that and move on to something better. But it's the first thing, the chief thing. And it's something we ought to be praying for.

As we go through this book of Proverbs, can I ask you to pray that you will grow in the fear of the Lord. And the people around you, your friends, will grow in the fear of the Lord. It's not a phrase we use.

We're not comfortable with this phrase. But we want to be. We want to grow in it. And it will increase. That's the way of wisdom. So that's the first point, the way of wisdom.

Now we come to the second point, the way of the world, verses 8 to 19. And this is the very first teaching in the book. And it's very dark and heavy. It's how we get drawn out of the path of life into the way of death.

And it's got a bit of everything. It's got easy money. It's got blood. It's fundamentally about greed.

Now, if you were writing the book of Proverbs, where would you start?

[17:04] Would you start with greed? A friend of mine who's a minister ran a seven-week series on the seven deadly sins. And he said, people crowded in to hear the talks on lust and wrath and pride.

Hardly anyone came to the week on greed, he said. And the conclusion he came to was that nobody thinks they're greedy. And I think he's right. This is a fundamental form of idolatry to which we are most blind.

And he wrote later on his blog, as a pastor, I've had people come to me and confess that they struggle with almost every kind of sin. Almost. I cannot recall anyone ever coming to me and saying, I spend too much money on myself.

I think my greedy lust for money is harming my family, my soul, and the people around me. Greed hides itself. The reason I say that is I think as we go into this section on greed, we ought to assume, give ourselves the benefit of the doubt, you ought to assume you're a greedy person.

I do. I mean, I do for me. And I do for you. You know what I mean. So, how does this work?

[18:21] Well, the father brilliantly exposes the core of the glittering, shining, blinding temptation. And he tells his son the actual words that he'll hear in the temptation.

And if you look at the speech from 11 to 14 that the gang makes to the boy, they offer three things to him. The first thing they offer is a bogus blessing.

Verse 13. We shall find all precious goods and we shall fill our houses with plunder. Plunder. That's a God word, the fill.

That's the creation word. They're saying we will go outside of God's boundaries and that's where we'll get blessing. We'll fill our houses with plunder. They say God's word can't be trusted.

True blessing and true filling comes outside his boundaries by acting together on greed. And notice they live in houses, big houses with lots of plunder. They live next door. They live in Vancouver.

[19:21] They're not out there in a cave. They have mansions in the best part of the city, bulging with precious goods which imitate God's blessing.

This is the first offer. It's bogus blessings. Secondly, they offer phony pleasure. Verse 11. If they say, says the Father, come with us.

Come off the path. Come onto our path. And let us lie in wait for blood. Let us ambush the innocent without reason. Like she'll let us swallow them alive.

And whole like those who go down. It's a kind of excitement, isn't it? You know, we're going to be the ones who deal our death to the unexpected. We're going to take charge of the innocent and reason.

And what they're doing is, you see, with this phony pleasure is they want to cut any tie between their actions and the consequences. They offer bogus blessing and phony pleasure.

[20 : 21] And finally, they offer a counterfeit community. Verse 14. Throw in your lot among us. We will all have one purse.

And what makes this counterfeit community so very attractive is that it is radically egalitarian. And that makes it a certain West Coast winner, doesn't it?

Because we are utterly potty for egalitarianism. None of this pesky fear of the Lord business or humbling ourselves before his word. You could say that they want to form a counterfeit community gripped by the gospel of greed.

But it's based, you see, on a worldview that real prosperity and blessing and excitement comes in defiance of God in taking things into our own hands. And I think it's a great thing for us to see how it works.

Because the way it works is by stirring up our imaginations. The pictures go at our imaginations.

And we begin to picture these things. And we build the pictures.

[21 : 24] We dream about them. And we think about them. And we coddle the pictures in our mind until they have more weight for us than the Lord. Until we live in the fear of missing out rather than the fear of the Lord.

And the connection between our actions and our consequences become foggy. And none of us starts out thinking we're going to shed blood. Come on, we're Canadians.

But we find ourselves doing things we never thought we would. And then we begin to justify ourselves. It's quite brilliant the way the Father exposes this, isn't he? They're condemned by their own words.

They say, let's be like shale. Let's be the mouth of death. Because greed has an absolutely limitless appetite, just like death. And when we step down the path of greed, the Father says, it swallows us whole and it always brings death.

And you might be thinking, and I'm not sure, but you might be thinking, it's a little bit overwrought, don't you think? It's a little bit extreme. I've never spilled any blood.

[22 : 30] I've never taken the life of the innocent. Well, maybe. I think we've given greed a far more socially acceptable face today.

We've cut the tie between our choices and consequences by giving them over to our financial advisors. A few years ago, they introduced so-called ethical funds.

You know about this? And the natural question I wanted to ask was, whose ethics are they? So I asked my financial advisor for a prospectus of one of our RRSPs.

And it had 250 companies in it. Printed on lovely glossy paper. Several trees died for that. The brochure on ethical...

Anyway, what I found... What I found was there was a high concentration of companies that were involved in fetal, experimental fetal treatment. And an oil company, which has largely corrupted and polluted an entire nation in Africa.

[23 : 36] And I know the story of this nation. The opposition leader who spoke out about the corruption was murdered. You see, there's a terrible realism in this passage.

It's the perfect passage if you have someone... If you have a church in south-central Chicago, and you've got a single mum with a son who is really enamoured with the gangs.

Or if you're a parent, two parents here in Canada, with a child who just is becoming very excited about the rewards of joining ISIS. See, this is where we get the first proverb in the book.

It's verse 17. This is one proverb for today. And I'll just back up and read 15 to 17. My son, says the father, don't walk in the way with them.

Hold back your foot from their paths. For their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed blood. Here it is. For in vain is a net spread in the sight of any bird.

[24 : 38] Do you understand? The criminals, the birds. They think they're setting a trap for the innocent. But they are the ones who are going to be caught.

The birds have two things. The birds have eyes, and the birds have wings. And if the birds use the eyes, and they use their wings, they won't be caught. But if the eyes are dazzled by the glittering date, they'll never see the hook, they'll never see the net, and they'll never be able to fly away.

Verse 18. But these men lie and wait for their own blood. They set an ambush for their own lives.

My son, you see the trap?

The house full of plunder, the excitement of the chase, the egalitarian community. It's a lethal net for your soul. Use your eyes and see. Use your wings and fly.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. And then verse 19, the last verse. Solomon turns to all of us, and he says, such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain. [25 : 50] It takes away the life of its possessors. We don't have time, but the rest of chapter 20, should you read it today, it's the opposite call from the woman wisdom.

This dark section warning about greed comes out of love. And the reason it's here, and the reason it's so realistic, is God has no wish for anyone to die.

And he calls every single one of us, young and old, to see the deadly trap of greed for unjust gain, not just because it's fruitless and futile and will lead you into a trap, but because the real blessing comes from the fear of the Lord, and he is more ready to give than we are to receive.

And I think many of us are probably conscious that we've made foolish decisions. And so I finish with this, that these are the proverbs of King Solomon, who was wiser than anyone in his day with the wisdom of God.

But Solomon died a fool. He didn't take his own advice. He accumulated wives who turned his heart after foreign gods, and he stopped listening to his wise advisors, and he overtaxed his people building lavish, building projects, and his lifestyle.

[27 : 12] So that although the wisdom that we have here is from God, ultimately we need someone greater than Solomon. We need a saviour who is the way, who is the embodiment of wisdom, who understands our weakness, who can make good on the promise, if any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, and it will be given without reproach.

Jesus. Amen.