

The Big Decision (Evening Service)

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Date: 24 September 2017

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[0 : 00] Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening. In Christ's name, amen. Okay, well, good evening again.

So we are in Proverbs. We're doing a series in Proverbs, if you're just joining us for the first time this evening. And it's been brilliant so far. I mean, it's just very encouraging, very challenging. Proverbs does deal with moral issues, but it also sort of deals with all the other stuff that sort of falls between the cracks of the rest of the Bible.

Like we know we shouldn't kill and steal and stuff. But what happens, what do we do about, let's say we have two job options before us, or two school options. What do we take? Let's say we're dating somebody.

Do we marry them? How do we sort of deal with a boss that's really difficult? I mean, there are good decisions to make in these situations. There's bad decisions to make.

What do we do? Well, Proverbs says to us what we need is wisdom. We need wisdom, it says. And wisdom very simply means life competence. It means life competence.

[1 : 04] So wisdom is like this. In the Bible, actually, the word is used for somebody that's really skillful, like a craftsman. So it's really a skill. It's the skill. It's the ability to make the best decision in the majority of situations that you face in life, which means that wisdom is not just this helpful bonus that you might have, this helpful bonus ability like having a great sense of direction or being quite athletic.

Those things are lovely. They're helpful, but they're not essential to your life. Proverbs says that wisdom is essential. It's if you don't have wisdom, you're hooped. You can ruin your life.

So we need wisdom. We need it desperately. And how do we get it? We talked about this last week. The source of wisdom is this thing called the fear of the Lord, and it's this awe and loving reverence of God.

We don't want to dishonor him. That's the place where wisdom comes from. So that was all a bit of a catch-up for the first couple of weeks. Now to this week's passages. So we had two readings you heard, chapter 3, chapter 4.

It's probably going to be helpful to have your Bibles open. So we will start with chapter 4. Two things I really love about this chapter.

[2 : 22] One, I love the directness of our passage in chapter 4. It's so direct. And secondly, I love the kind of the romance aspects of it. I'll explain that in a moment. It's just brilliant.

First, the directness of it. Very simply, it's... See verse 7? I just love verse 7. It says, The beginning of wisdom is this. Get wisdom. Isn't it just great, right?

It's just like, so you're thinking about wisdom. You're thinking about getting wisdom in your life? Yeah, you should get wisdom. Just go out. Just get wisdom. What's wrong with you? You should get wisdom.

It's awesome. Wisdom. Go get it. Love it. Very direct. And what it does, though, is it doesn't just say that. It sort of couches the whole thing in this quite romantic sort of language.

Proverbs personifies wisdom as a woman. And the language is quite lovey-dovey. I don't know if you picked up on that. But so when talking about wisdom, which it says is this...

[3 : 22] It says wisdom's like this woman, you know. It says you should love her. And you should prize her. And it says you should embrace her. It's the Hebrew word for cuddle.

It's the Hebrew word for, like, caress. It's actually quite erotic, the language here. It's the similar words that are used in the Song of Solomon. It's the language of sexual intimacy between a man and a woman.

And by the way, that's the last time I will use the word erotic in the sermon this evening. Just in case. Just in case that makes you feel uncomfortable.

So here we go. So the big point is this, though. It's basically saying... It's saying make the decision to go after wisdom.

Pursue wisdom. Pursue it like a man that's fallen in love with this gorgeous woman he's met. And he just... Oh, all the intensity and drive of that.

[4 : 23] And so it does that. It says it positively. And then it says it negatively in verse 6. It says don't forsake her. And in the Old Testament, that forsake word, that's divorce language. It means abandoning someone.

So it's saying go after wisdom. Don't break up with wisdom. Keep pursuing her your whole life. And what will wisdom do for you? It says...

This is just direct quotes from the passage. She'll keep you. She'll guard you. She'll exalt you. She'll honor you. She'll make your life better. And then I love verse 9.

She will place on your head a graceful garland. She will bestow on you a beautiful crown. Woman wisdom will make your life beautiful. That's what it's saying.

Now, how does that work? Well, it works a bit like this. So, when I walk down the street, no one looks at me. Okay? There you go. This is it, right?

[5 : 20] But when I walk down the street with my wife, it changes. People look at me. And here's why. My wife is gorgeous. And so, I can see this.

It's quite a common thing for me to look at. They look at my wife. And they think she's beautiful. And then they look at me. And you can see the confusion in their eyes. Right? And it's really obvious. You can see them go, oh. Oh. You can see them trying to work out how that, like, how did that happen?

And they're sort of going, we must be missing something here. Yeah. And I know this is what they think to themselves.

They think, okay, well, obviously there's more to him. So, maybe he's really rich. Or maybe he has an incredible personality. So, basically, when Amy is with me, it makes other people think well of me.

[6 : 24] People think, if he can be with her, man, he must be amazing. She beautifies me. She makes me look really good. That's what wisdom does.

It beautifies us. So, you can be academically really average. You don't have to be rich or famous. But if you have wisdom, that's the beautiful life.

So, in summary, chapter 4, go for it. Wisdom. Go after it. Decide to be wiser tomorrow than you were today. Decide to be wiser next year than you were this year.

Get wisdom. That's chapter 4. Get wisdom. Now, chapter 3. Chapter 3 is very helpful to us. So, if chapter 4 says, get wisdom, chapter 3 says, here's what wisdom looks like.

Although, I feel we could just stop and pray and go home at this point. But let's go. Let's keep going. Chapter 3. What's the big point? The structure is really simple, actually, in chapter 3.

[7 : 26] It looks like just sort of rando sort of things. But it's actually, there's some cool structure to it. The odd verses, if you sort of slide your eyes down it, the odd verses say, do this, do this, do this.

The even verses say, and here's the consequence if you do this. So, they're little couplets. One, two. One, two. One, two. One, two. Do this consequence. Do this consequence.

Do this consequence. So, examples. Verse 1. Keep the commandments. Verse 2. You'll know a life of peace. Verse 5. Trust in the Lord. Verse 6. He will make your paths straight.

Verse 9. Honour the Lord. You will prosper. Right. So, six little couplets of what wisdom looks like. Now, you might be thinking, those promises sound amazing.

Long life, prosperity, all that. But that's not true of Christians, is it? That's not true of all Christians. Like, Christians, sometimes Christians don't live like super long lives and we're not all really rich.

[8 : 21] So, what do we make of this then? Well, we don't want to overcomplicate this. Here's what it's saying. We don't want to over-spiritualize it either.

It's saying that wise living has tangible benefits. Wise living pays off. Wise living is the path to the good life.

It's the path to healing. Wisdom pays off. And we will all enjoy all of the benefits of how wisdom is described here in eternity and we'll enjoy some of those benefits now.

But it's not a slot machine, right? We don't sort of like insert trust, receive money, and a long life. And if you do think this from reading this, well, the great thing is, is you have like another sort of, you know, 27 chapters of Proverbs to sort that attitude out.

Because Proverbs is very realistic as well, isn't it? And whilst here it might say, it might sort of sound like, yeah, this is a slot machine promise. Later on it's going to say, well, you know what? [9:28] The wise can be poor. And the wise can get in trouble. Okay. So that's that. Let's have a look at a few of the couplets now, right? So we begin with the central sort of verse of this.

The key verse is verse 5. So I think it's verse 5 and all the other stuff around it sort of comes out of verse 5. So verse 5 says this.

Here's what wisdom looks like. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make straight your paths. Trust in the Lord.

What does that mean? It literally means, trust with literally means to lean on. So leaning, like I'm leaning on this here right now and with my massive upper body and I'm hoping this will hold me up and it does.

But it's actually leaning to the point of being off balance. So if this thing was pulled away, I'm in trouble. I'm going to fall over. So that's what it means to trust in the Lord. Trust in the Lord. Lean on the Lord to the point where you're actually sort of off balance here.

[10:31] That's the picture. Now why would we do that though? Maybe you have trust issues. You ask yourself, why would I trust the Lord? Well, we have many reasons to trust the Lord.

Let me give you one. In Luke chapter 1, an angel comes to Mary and says this.

That's a remarkable idea, isn't it? The most high God is coming to you and you will have a child called Jesus.

So God is the most high. It's described here. He's described as the most high. You don't get much higher than the most high, right? He will become a baby.

You don't get much more vulnerable than a baby. So from the highest high to this very, very sort of low, low, from the highest high to the low, low, there is no other religion that sort of makes a claim like that.

[11:31] That God, the most high, becomes vulnerable. And why did God do this? Why did he become flesh and blood?

God became flesh. He became vulnerable so he could be hurt. So he could die. And this is why we can't just respect Jesus. We can't just admire him from afar.

As, you know, a great moral teacher or sort of like an activist or something like that. That we grab a few phrases from that we like. Oh, he's God. He's higher than we can imagine. He became lower than anyone ever has.

And he did that so we could have peace with God. Now, why am I telling all this? We have lots of reasons to trust Jesus. We have more reasons than the original readers of Proverbs had to trust Jesus.

A God that would do this for us. We can trust this God, can't we? We can trust God with our whole heart. So that's the central idea of the passage.

[12:33] Trust in the Lord with all your heart. It's what the wise life looks like. And I think the other couplets here, they give us examples of what trusting in the Lord looks like.

So one of the examples is the issue of money here. Verse 9. Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the first fruits of your produce. So honor, it means to sort of make something known.

It means to sort of elevate them, right? So it literally means if you're really generous with your money and your resources, it says something about the God that you follow. Now, being generous, though, that is a tough thing for many of us.

It's tough for me. It's a very tough thing. How do we change? What does the Holy Spirit need to tell us about money that can create this kind of well of generosity in our hearts?

How do we change in this area? So Alistair McIntyre. Some of you would have heard of this guy. He was a Catholic philosopher. And actually, is he still alive?

[13:40] Maybe he's still alive. He's still alive. He must be getting pretty old now. He wrote this sort of fairly seminal kind of book called After Virtue in the early 80s, I think. And what he said is, and it's this really sort of important book.

But one of his really big ideas is this. He says, things only make sense within a narrative, within a story. Now, I'm going somewhere. So just stay with me for two minutes here, okay? It's going to feel a bit random, but just stay with me here. And he tells the story to illustrate the fact that things only make sense within a narrative. So he says this. This is one of his famous story goes. He says, So it's crazy.

McIntosh says, This is bizarre. How do I make sense of this? He says, Well, it would make sense if a story was put around it. And so he suggests some possible stories.

He says, One story is this. Maybe the guy, the duck guy who turned to me, maybe he was in the library earlier that day, and a stranger came up to him and said, Do you know the Latin name for the common wild duck?

[15:03] And duck guy says, I'm sorry, I don't know, but maybe duck guy's a really nice guy and finds out what it is and then tries to find the guy, can't find him. And then he goes to the bus stop, sees McIntyre, and thinks McIntyre is the guy because they look really similar.

And he goes, Oh, the name for the common wild duck is history on it. See, that would make sense, right? Then he's not a crazy person. Then it's like, Ah, that makes sense of that situation.

Another story could be this. Story number two could be this. Is that the guy is really unwell. Really socially awkward. Really quite unwell.

And his counselor says, Listen, I want you to start making conversations. I know you're awkward. Just start making conversations with whoever you meet. And this is an example of this. Another story, the last one.

The third story that McIntyre says could make sense of this whole situation. He goes, The stranger could be a Russian spy. And I am coincidentally standing at the rendezvous point, and a spy comes up and utters the code that I'm supposed to respond to to get some secret briefcase or something.

[16:09] How McIntyre responds to the duck guy, what he thinks the story is, is going to change that response, isn't it?

So if the story is the library one, he's going to have a bit of a laugh with the guy. If the story is the guy's quite unwell, he'll be quite sympathetic towards the guy. If it's the Russian spy story, he's going to freak out, obviously.

Now, why am I telling you all this? Here we go. Let's land the plane here. Okay, think about your resources. Think about your money. The money you have. How do you look at it? How do you think about your money?

Well, it all depends on what you think the story of the world is. If you think that when you die, you rot, and this is it, this is all there is, and all the happiness you'll ever enjoy is right here and right now, then you spend the money all on yourself.

Why wouldn't you? You maximize your happiness right now. But what if the story of the world is, this is not all there is.

[17:17] What if the narrative is this, that this is only a small part of an eternal life waiting for us? Then in that story, well, your money looks quite different then, doesn't it?

Your money doesn't have such a strong grip on our hearts. We can actually afford to be generous with it because this is not all there is. And this is what the Christian story should do for us.

It gives us this totally new narrative for living our life. And the more you sort of immerse yourself in that story, the more we change. Okay.

That was a slight excuse. Where are we in the sermon right now? We're talking about honoring the Lord with our money. And that's an example of trusting in the Lord with all your heart.

Let's keep going. Another example of trusting in the Lord, not just money, but verse 7. It says, Be not wise in your own eyes.

[18:17] Fear the Lord and turn away from evil. Be not wise in your own eyes. Remember the context, trusting in the Lord. How does verse 7 relate to trust? Well, if you trust someone, you trust their warnings.

You trust that they know better when it comes to naming evil. So verse 7 is basically saying this. It's saying, Agree with God about what is evil. And you do that so you can turn away from it.

And again, I just think modern Christians, I think we have trouble with this. I think we have trouble agreeing with God about what is evil. And it's very easy to make excuses about why we don't turn away from evil.

It's just entertainment. As I say to my wife, if we watch a very violent movie, Babe, it's just, it's full noir. This is full noir.

Or we could say, This is how you just do business here. This is the way we've always done it. Everybody's doing it.

[19 : 24] This is the 21st century. That's trusting in your own assessment of evil. That's you thinking you're exempt from God's law.

It's you thinking you get to make your own standards when it comes to morality. It's you thinking you're too clever to be harmed by sin. It's you thinking, as Proverbs talks about, it's you thinking you can pick out fire and not get burnt.

We need to agree with God about what is evil. Look at verse 6. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. In all your ways acknowledge him.

See, we don't get to pick and choose where we trust the Lord. That's the divided heart. That's the two-minded person the Bible talks about later on.

See, the wise person doesn't say, Well, I'll trust the Lord. Ah, I trust the Lord. You know, I trust the Lord in most of it except for my romantic relationships. In that part of it, I'm going to make my own decisions.

[20 : 29] No, the wise bring God into their whole life. The wise live with the constant awareness that God is present. This is what acknowledging him means.

When you think about that for a moment, what does it mean to acknowledge God? We acknowledge other important people, right? So if I'm at a party, my wife walks in, I'm not going to ignore her.

I'm going to acknowledge her because she's the most important person in the room to me. Or you're in the military and your sergeant walks in. You acknowledge them because that person's your superior.

See, what do the wise do? The wise acknowledge that in every location, in every situation, in every decision, the Lord has the greatest authority.

The wise acknowledge the Lord in everything. So that's another way we trust in the Lord with all of our hearts. Now, let me finish up here. If you don't have wisdom, you're in trouble.

[21 : 35] You're in trouble. Wisdom. Proverbs 4 taught us that it is this gorgeous man, this gorgeous woman who's just become part of your social circle and you can't imagine living without them and you bend all your sort of endeavors to being with them.

Pursue wisdom, chapter 4 says. Pursue it. Commit yourself to wisdom. Commit yourself to being wiser tomorrow than you were today. And how do we do that? Is we practice trust.

We practice trusting the Lord. We acknowledge the Lord in all of our decisions. That's the wise life, folks. That's the good life. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.