

The Big Decision

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[0 : 01] Well, good morning. I want to add my welcome to Dan's and Jeremy's. My name's David Short. I also work on staff here. And if you're new, come and say hi to me after the service.

I promise to be nice. Within reason. Now, let's turn back to Proverbs chapter 3 and we'll look at a little bit of 4 on page 528 in the Bibles.

This is probably one of the best known texts in all of the scriptures, really, not just Proverbs. Proverbs 3 verse 5.

It seems simple, doesn't it? And we probably should print refrigerator magnets and hand them out and stop the service now and send you home.

Do they still make fridge magnets? No, they don't. They do. You get the idea. But it's easy to miss just how remarkable this is.

[1 : 09] This is our third week in Proverbs and already we've seen that the way Proverbs works really differently from anywhere else in the Bible. It doesn't give us a narrative. It doesn't give us a list of things to do or to believe.

It comes at us from below. It gives us a picture of the good life from a thoroughly realistic and practical picture which arises from our increasing connection with God.

And the way it does it is by exposing what we really love. Because what we really love determines what we really do. Isn't that right?

Yes, of course it is. So it's addressed to the heart and not so much the mind. And the problem with that for us is that we often don't know what our heart really wants.

We don't really love the things that we say we love. So if I was to ask all you good Christians, what do you really love?

[2 : 08] You would all give me fabulously spiritual answers, I'm absolutely sure. But the only real way to tell what we really love is to watch what you do. And the purpose of Proverbs is to take our hearts and to recalibrate them toward the fear and love of the Lord.

And it does that in a number of ways through the practices of wisdom, through the habits of the heart. By showing us what the good life looks like. Let me come at that a completely different way.

So, there are a number of different understandings of our identity and who we are and how we live today. Let me just mention two on offer on the West Coast.

One is, I think, therefore I am. Have you heard of that? I'm a rational being. Fill me with the right ideas, beliefs, facts. I'll listen to audio. I'll read.

I'm like a bank. And I need to make deposits of information and beliefs into my bank. And then I'll make a bit of a profit. I think, therefore I am. I'm going to think my way to wisdom. And there's part truth in that.

[3 : 13] We are transformed by the renewing of our minds. But the only problem is, as we saw two weeks ago, we have this staggering ability of self-deception.

Remember that in chapter 20? And there's another path on offer. And it says, I choose. Therefore I am. We have become individuals.

Disembedded from anything transcendent. And what makes something good, what makes the choice good is that I've chosen it. My preference. The problem is that it doesn't have any weight.

It doesn't have any meaning. I mean, I can ascribe some meaning to it, but I might take that meaning away. This is called the unbearable lightness of being.

If you add to that the problem that we're too busy, too distracted, and our lives are too crowded to really ask the deep questions. You know, we come home from long hours of work and we dedicate ourselves to entertainment and addiction and it gobbles up the rest of our energies.

[4 : 19] And, you know, we have become absolutely skilled and clever and brilliant at getting from point A to point B, but we've got no idea what point B ought to be.

And there's a Christian version of this, right? That the Christian faith is a sort of a skill to manage my life. But the course of my life and the direction of my life is not really formed by the love of God, but by the cultural habits I'm immersed in.

You know, success, work, entertainment. And that's why, if that's where we're at, our Christian faith has no transforming power. Proverbs doesn't teach, I think, therefore I am, or I choose, therefore I am, but I love, therefore I am.

And since love starts and operates in the heart, it's under the hood, it's under the radar. And I can't see what's in your heart.

For any real change, there has to be a recalibration and a reorientation. And the way Proverbs does this is by showing us how our love should be tied and can be tied to the good life.

[5 : 34] It's a book about aligning our longings for God. That's what this section is about. It's about two things. It's about trust and love.

Last week we looked at chapter 1, the fear of the Lord. The great commission of Proverbs is to fear the Lord. What does that look like?

Well, this week there are two more commissions spelling out what the fear of the Lord looks like. And one is to trust the Lord and the other is to love the Lord. And you saw, remember we saw last week that fear of the Lord is not cringing, grovelling terror, but it's trust and love.

So I've got two points this morning. One, the first one's much longer than the second, you'll be pleased to hear. And the first is the commission to trust. And this is in chapter 3, verses 1 to 12.

And I point out as I begin this point, did you notice that God is after our hearts? See, verse 1, second half of verse 1. Let your heart keep my commandment.

[6 : 35] Or verse 3. Steadfast love and faithfulness, last line, write them on the tablet of your heart. Verse 5, trust the Lord with all your heart.

Because the heart is the control centre of who I am and my decisions and my feelings. To quote one commentator, it's the centre of a person's emotional, intellectual, religious, moral activity.

You know, this is where we reflect and love and hope and decide. And it is deceptive. Remember we said our hearts are unfathomable to us and deceptive, but not to God.

I want to show you how important the heart is. So just keep your finger in chapter 3 for a second. Just turn over one page, chapter 4, to verse 23. Chapter 4, verse 23.

I think Jeremy should write a little song on this verse as well. This is a very good memory verse. Proverbs 4, 23. I shouldn't disturb the flow of the sermon at this point, but I wrote a card, a going away card for someone a month ago.

[7 : 45] And I mistook verse 24 for 23. And so I'm picturing them opening this as they're flying away, thinking they've got to put away crooked speech and devious talk.

However, I meant verse 23. Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.

This keeping with vigilance is used for guarding a dangerous prisoner who wants to escape and is very sneaky, sneaky, sneaky. And it's used for being a guard or a bodyguard for someone very important, careful so nothing bad happens to them.

And two weeks ago we learned in chapter 20 that our heart is a very dangerous criminal indeed, a repeat offender. Cannot be trusted, can't understand it, right? It deceives us all the time.

And it's hard work guarding a deceptive prisoner. But it's also very important. This is, I think, more the point of the verse. It's a positive picture of guarding and caring for a heart because it's so important.

[8 : 57] In fact, it's the most important thing for us to guard partly because it's self-deceived, but partly because from it flow the springs of life. It's the source of all the outward movement of ourselves, our longings and our doings.

It all comes out of the heart. We extend ourselves. We go out to things based on what our heart loves. The direction of our lives are by what our heart loves.

That means that real change is not going to come from the outside by trying to do certain things or add disciplines or stop doing certain things. It's only going to happen by change of heart, orientation to trust and love God.

And in chapter 3, verses 1 to 12, if we go back to that, there are six little couples, six pairs, and each one starts, if you do this, then this is going to happen. But the heart of it, the center of it, is verses 5 to 8.

And every word you please notice is relational. There's nothing abstract and intellectual. It's speaking of how we are with God and how God is with us.

[10 : 04] And every word makes a claim on us because you can't get wisdom on your own, away from God, apart from God.

God doesn't send us wisdom in texts or emails and then leave us to our own devices. It comes as we love and trust him. In fact, we can't even talk about God as though we were objective and neutral observers, right?

Everything we say about God demonstrates what our heart loves, where our hearts are toward him. We're already engaged and we're relating to him in some way, shape or form. It might be good, it might be bad.

My point is just simply you can't get wisdom apart from God and it begins with trust. Verse 5, this is the big verse. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding.

Now the thing about trust is it is very personal and very dangerous. It means taking a risk, doesn't it? It means stepping out based on the reliability of the other person.

[11 : 12] That's why he says trust in the Lord. Our trust is directed to the person of God himself. And that means letting go of control.

Something many of you find it very difficult to do. Me included. It means putting control in the hands of the Lord. Moving forward in trust.

It's only when we do that and when we act it out, do we demonstrate that we think he's worthy. That he is kind and true and reliable, competent.

See, it's a very different view of the Christian life. The Christian life is not about having all the answers. God has never promised to give us all the answers. It's a commitment based life where we throw ourselves on God and put ourselves in debt to him.

It means making myself vulnerable to God. God has never promised to give us all the answers.

[12 : 35] What do we need to trust him for now? I mean, every single one of us has something, perhaps many things we need to trust him for. What is it? How do you not lean on your own understanding or lean all your weight on him and trust him with all your heart?

And I ask the question because it's completely unnatural. Verse 5 says, don't lean on your own understanding. Well, of course, because it's tiny and it's also broken.

Verse 7, do not be wise in your own eyes. Fear the Lord and turn away from evil because we're not wiser than God. But this is the problem. It's talking about a kind of trust where you don't do 50-50.

And actually, what we usually do with God is we do 49-51, don't we? We just keep a little bit back for ourselves. And that's very sensible if you're buying a used car, but it's not sensible with God.

Now, I trust lots of people. I trust my doctor. I trust my doctor to write sensible prescriptions for me. I trust my mechanic to fix the brakes on my car. And he does frequently.

[13 : 45] But I don't trust them with all my heart. They're good at what they do, but they don't deserve all my heart's trust. But the Lord does.

He deserves all your heart's trust. I mean, is there anything God has done to you ever that would demonstrate that you can't trust him fully? I mean, did he hold back his only son?

No, he gave him up for us all. Will he not give us all things with him? It's the only path to wisdom to cast ourselves on him in trust, looking to him for blessing.

And the passage doesn't leave us in that spot. It says it's got to show practically by what we do. It can't just be confined to the inner recesses of our hearts or Sunday hymn singing.

I think, so look down at verse 9 and 10. Honour the Lord. Worship the Lord with your wealth and with the first fruits of all your produce.

[14 : 49] Then your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will be bursting with wine. Those of you who have vats. You see, it's a future-oriented thing.

It's the opposite of paralysis. To trust is to move based on love, based on yearning for a new possibility.

It's stepping out and it's based entirely on believing the dependability of the Lord. And again, you can only tell what someone trusts by what they do. And one demonstration that the writer of Proverbs chooses here, in verses 9 to 10, is what we do with our money.

It will show in the concrete amount of money you give away to the Lord. Not just how you make it or how you think about it, whether it controls you. It's talking about giving to God from the first fruits.

And we saw this last year. You remember when we looked at 2 Corinthians. The first fruits are the first part of the harvest. The best part of the harvest. Before you know what you're actually going to earn by the end of the harvest.

[15 : 56] Now you might think this is pretty extravagant. This promise of filling barns and barns to bursting. And, you know, God giving me shalom, peace in verse 2 or in verse 4.

I'll have favour with God and man. He'll make my paths straight. And you might be thinking, really? I mean, some of you may have really trusted God with your finances, but you find your barns pretty empty.

My barn fell down years ago. And sometimes it looks like God's not keeping up his end. To say nothing of the other difficulties I face and the persecution, where is this straight path?

But I think we must not confuse a straight path with an easy path, with a path of luxury. This phrase, he'll make your path straight, is exactly the phrase used in the prophet about the coming of Jesus Christ.

In the wilderness, a voice cries, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. You see, Jesus is held up as the one who trusted God, and God made his path straight before him.

[17 : 06] Was it pain-free? Was it easy? No, it wasn't. But it was the path of greatest flourishing and greatest shalom, peace and greatest fullness and greatest favour.

And that is what the straight path is. It's walking in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. And I think verses 11 and 12 complete the picture for us. They're so important.

They say, My son, and you remember last week, this means my daughter as well, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father, the son in whom he delights.

So when things get difficult and when the circumstances in which you'll find yourself are impossible, the question to ask is not, Is God letting me down? The question to ask is, What is the sovereign hand of God trying to teach me?

Where have I wandered away from him? Where am I leaning on my own understanding and not trusting him? How can I trust God and lean on him and love him in this difficult circumstances?

[18 : 14] Those of you who are parents know that discipline is a mark of love, that no discipline is a sign of abdication and abandonment. But in the discipline and in the difficulties, God is moulding us into the image of Christ.

Trusting him in this place is what faith is, and he's showing you his love. And that is a nice transition to our second point. So trust in the Lord with all your heart is the first.

And the second is this big commission to love. And we might take a look at chapter four. I read a book this week that said, Human beings are fundamentally erotic creatures.

I read these books. This is by a Christian professor. He says, Unfortunately, the word erotic carries only negative connotations. In our pornographied, Pornographied culture.

He's talking about the fact that we are wired as humans to be driven by attraction and desire and love. And the wonderful possibility that it is, it is possible to reorient our loves toward God himself.

[19 : 23] This is what it means to fear the Lord. And that's why I want to look at chapter four. It goes with chapter three, because the good life is pictured just right here in these few verses in chapter four, as falling hopelessly in love with lady wisdom.

And wisdom is personified as the most amazing bride. And the language is completely unashamedly of a love between a man and a woman who are married.

So look at verse six of chapter four. Do not forsake her and she will keep you. Love her and she will guard you. That's the full affection of a man for a woman.

Or verse eight. Prize her highly. This is escalating the language. This is cherish her as you would a wife of your youth. She will honor you. She will exalt you.

She will honor you. If you embrace her, and I've read the commentaries on this, this is the Hebrew word for cuddling. So it was the old Saint Augustine in the fifth century who said, love is like the gravity of my soul.

[20 : 33] He says everything has gravity. He says rocks move down toward their resting point down. Fire moves upwards. Oil and water. Oil, it floats on water, doesn't it?

And everything's anxious and restless until it finds its resting place. And our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him. And this force of gravity, this leading and attracting force is love.

And it operates in us without us thinking about it. And five times here the father says in chapter four, get wisdom, get wisdom, get wisdom. She'll guard you. She'll honor you because she comes from God and is leading you to God.

And she binds all your loves together in a crown. And it looks like Jesus Christ. And you might say that sounds very nice. But what does it look like in action? And for that, I want to go back to chapter three and look at verse six.

In all your ways, acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths.

[21 : 41] And I want to just explain that acknowledge is not an intellectual or cerebral word. It is from the Hebrew word for sexual intercourse.

To know is profoundly intimate. The first time it's used of humans in the Bible is when Adam knew his wife as she conceived and bore a son.

So to acknowledge the Lord in all your paths is more than trying to take every thought captive. It's more than just acknowledging you have authority over this God.

I think it's even more than trusting God in each path of life. The way the commentators translate it is it is to desire his presence.

It's to love him in the different areas of life. It's to seek him, to want him because he is sufficient for you because you do trust him. Now, how does that work on Monday morning?

[22 : 44] I mean, how do you live as a Christian? And we've got these commandments over here, these big picture things. We've got big principles like being generous and world mission and those sorts of things. But what about the ambiguous and daily decisions of life?

What are we to do? The answer Proverbs gives us is to seek God's presence in each of those things. Let me give you a famous example. If you keep your finger in chapter three and turn right to chapter 26, just for a minute or two.

This is wonderful. Verse 4, chapter 26, verse 4, page 547.

It says, answer not a fool. Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.

Pretty straightforward, isn't it? A fool says something foolish. Don't use his own logic to answer him or you'll be a fool as well. Verse 5. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

[23 : 54] Wait a minute. Wait a minute. That's the opposite. Now you're saying I should answer the fool according to his foolish logic to keep him from being wise in his own eyes.

And obviously there are times to do one and times to do the other. And how do you tell the difference? Well, everyone here over 50 says, well, that's where experience comes in.

That doesn't really help us, does it? The answer from Proverbs is this. Seek God's presence in the decision. Seek to love him and trust him and you will know what to do.

And I think that is such a relief. The wisdom doesn't come at a great distance from God, but it's in drawing close to him and loving him and hungering and thirsting for his presence in the ambiguous decisions you and I make all the time.

Acknowledge him in all your ways. Know him. Seek his presence in everything. This is so different from the cultural currents, isn't it?

[24 : 58] So different from I choose, therefore I am. It's very different from the song that we hear, your special trust yourself. Be true to yourself. Be authentic.

Follow your passion. Don't accept limits. Chart your own course. You have a responsibility to do great things because you are great. None of that's true, by the way.

It's all nonsense. God has made us for himself and he loves us. And it's very interesting. You go back to chapter 3. I'll finish with this. Verse 12.

You notice in verse 11 and 12 that the father Solomon gradually disappears and the father becomes God. God. And we are his children.

And the New Testament takes these words and applies them straight to Jesus and straight to us. It's the sign that God loves us, that he's treating us as sons and daughters.

[26 : 00] But the problem is that none of us are able to trust him with all our hearts at all times. None of us are able to love him with all our allness. We just, we can't do it. I love the second verse of our second song.

See, Jesus did and still does.

And he surrendered himself to the discipline of the father out of love for you and me and out of love for the father. And what he did on the cross and what he now does as he intercedes for us enables us to love God even when we fail and to trust him even as we're failing.

To trust, to love God, it basically means to look to Jesus Christ in every circumstance of our life. The founder, the perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.

And it is seated at the right hand of the throne of God, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.