

Vision and Direction - New Year's Day Service

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[0 : 00] We'll turn for a short time this morning to that second passage that we read, Proverbs chapter 4, and I'd like us to think and reflect on words that you find in verse 25.

Let your eyes look directly forwards and your gaze be straight before you.

Ponder the path of your feet, then all your ways will be sure. I could even carry on to the end.

Verse 27, do not swerve. To the right or to the left, turn your foot away from evil. The first thing that strikes me about these words is that nobody would disagree with them.

If you were looking for something in the Bible over which everyone in the world would agree, you could choose these words.

[1 : 27] Taken as basic human guidelines, they can cross every cultural and religious barrier. Even atheists would agree with this verse if it was taken by itself.

It's the kind of verse that you might decide to frame or embroider or hang up on your wall to remind you about the importance of vision, direction, focus, preparation, certainty, and determination.

A person starting a business would praise these words as brilliant. Eyes on the prize, forethought, direction, vision.

A school or even a university might adopt this as a motto. I can't think of more appropriate words which might form the ethos or the philosophy of any center of learning than these.

Let your eyes look directly forwards and your gaze be straight before you. Ponder the path of your feet and then all your ways will be sure.

[2 : 46] If you read them in terms of the opportunities that there are in life, these words are brilliant advice for a young person who's leaving home.

There never has been a time when there's been more opportunity. But you have to take it and you have to work hard and keep focused and don't go off the path.

You could start a marriage on these words. These would be a good text for a wedding service. Let your eyes look directly forwards and your gaze be straight before you.

Ponder the path of your feet and then all your ways will be sure. The kind of words you could give to somebody who's gone off the straight and narrow and who's spent years in misery and in bondage and who's now trying to work his way backwards.

Let your eyes look directly forward and your gaze be straight before you. You could apply this verse to almost any situation in life.

[3 : 59] They're probably the most versatile words in the Bible. But today, I want us to think of them in relation to the beginning of a new year, 2012.

Today is a milestone. A milestone. I remember milestones when I was a wee boy. I'd be traveling from Glasgow to Inverness.

And there weren't the big, big, massive signs that you have on the A9 in those days. There were milestones. And we used to watch the milestones as the car went past.

Inverness 25 miles. Inverness 24. Inverness 23. Every milestone would be a marker of how near you were to your destination.

Each of us is traveling on a journey through life. And there is a destination. We just don't know how long it will be until we get there.

[5 : 01] And every year is a significant stage of that journey. For some of you, 2012 today contains significant events.

Some of you will graduate. Or finish your apprenticeship. Some of you will leave school. Or some of you will retire. Some of you will get married.

Some of you will buy another house or move house to somewhere else. And so it goes on. We always anticipate the good things, don't we?

And of course, there is something good in that. That is why we celebrate the start of a new year with anticipation. With forward looking.

With optimism. The problem is, of course, that when that optimism overshadows the realities of life, then we lose sight of the fact that life is a blend.

[5 : 59] It is a mixture of the good and the tragic. The highlights and the depths. And it is always wise to keep our eyes on the balance of life.

Well, in these words, as you can see, the first part is about your vision. Let your eyes look directly forwards and your gaze be straight before you.

And then the second part is about your direction. Ponder the path of your feet. And then all your ways will be sure.

Vision and direction. Seeing and walking. But not randomly seeing. Or randomly walking. It's not aimless. It's not an aimless journey that's described here.

The journey is seeing where you are going. And walking there. There's a connection between the two. There's a connection between your eyes and your feet. If you're going somewhere, you have to see with your eyes where you're going.

[7 : 08] And then you have to take that step forward. There's no point in taking that step forward if you can't see where you're going. And there's no point in seeing where you're going if you're not prepared to take that step forward.

There's a connection between what you want to do and what you aim at doing and what you actually do. And that's what this verse is all about. Vision and direction.

First of all, your vision. Let your eyes look directly forwards. First thing that this verse tells me is that your vision must be clear and focused and forward.

You can't walk anywhere unless you know and unless you can see where you're going and know where you're going. I guess another way of putting this is know where you're going and then go for it.

Let your life be lived in one direction. And don't stray from it. Look ahead. Point yourself in the direction you want your life to go in and then take steps in that direction.

[8 : 15] Be decisive. Make a decision. Don't just spend your whole life aimlessly doing nothing, going round in circles, chasing your tail. Make a direction. Make a decision.

Make sure that you walk in that direction. Decide what direction you want your life to go in. And by all means take time to think, but then you have to take those steps.

But just make sure that the path you take is the right one. Make sure that when you get to the end of the road, you can look back and say, I'm glad I took that first step and made up my mind to travel on this road.

And you might ask, well, how can you make sure? How can I know which path to focus on and to travel on? Well, the answer to that question is this.

By listening to the manufacturer. To our creator. Spurgeon said this once. He said, every wise man will conclude that the best way for a man is the way which God has made for him.

[9 : 43] Every wise man will conclude that the best way for a man is the way which God has made for him. I think you would agree with that. I don't think there's anybody here today that wouldn't agree with that philosophy.

That if I'm looking for the right path, then the one who knows what the right path is has got to be God. And so the key to living on the right path is to listen to God.

How do you know then what path God wants you to take? Jesus said, I am the way and the truth and the life.

The Bible says this is the way. Walk in it. So that means that if you today, at the beginning of 2012, are not a follower of Jesus, then there is only one direction which God is commanding you to set your eyes on.

And that is the direction of Jesus Christ. There's no point in looking to a minister or a religion or a denomination or a church.

[11 : 02] Being a Christian is being in personal relationship with Jesus Christ who said, I am the way and the truth and the life.

No one comes to the Father but by me. So which road are you traveling on today as we come to a milestone?

What is your destination? Which way are we going? And there is only one choice in the matter. We're either on the road that God has shown us in the person of Jesus Christ or else we're not. Whatever other options there are, we're either following the road which Jesus is on. Jesus has shown to us or we are not.

And today may be the best time of all when we're asking that question and when we discover that we haven't so far been traveling on that road to stop.

[12 : 08] Often in my life when I've been in the car or on a journey somewhere, I've often realized that I'm on the wrong road. When you're on the wrong road, you may take ages before you discover it.

You may be miles out of your way before you discover it. But the one thing that you don't do when you make that discovery is continue along that road. You stop and you about turn and you go all the way back to where you left the road in the first place.

And you rejoin the right road to the direction, to the destination that you want to go in. The craziest thing of all would be for you to continue and say, well, I've taken this decision and I'm not going to veer away from it.

Well, that's our pride. But it won't get us to the right destination. In order to get to the destination that we want to go to, you have to be on the right road.

Of course, nowadays, you've got sat-nav in your cars. I don't have sat-nav. I could never figure out why anybody needed sat-nav in Lewis because there are only three or four main roads.

[13 : 20] You're on one or the other. And it's pretty obvious to anyone which road you're traveling on. But if you're in the big cities, it's much more easy, it's much easier to take the wrong road. My son-in-law has sat-nav.

The first time I used it, the sat-nav was screaming at me, you're on the wrong road. Turn back. The Bible is a bit like that.

It's the first thing that God tells us today. You're on the wrong road. About turn. You know, I guess like any noise in the car, you could get used to the sat-nav telling you, turn back.

You're on the wrong road. And ignore it. And I want to ask you today, at the beginning of 2012, have you ignored God's sat-nav?

God's voice. And are you continuing in your own pride to not listen to the very voice, to the one voice in the universe that you need to listen to today?

[14 : 25] Make today that day when you listen to God's voice. When you finally, perhaps after years, listen to that voice.

Excuse me, I've got a cold coming on. I can feel my throat is struggling a wee bit. Now, the next stage, once you make that discovery that you're on the wrong road, and once you set your eyes, verse 25, let your eyes look directly forwards.

There's no point in just stopping there. You've got to do the next stage, which is ponder the path of your feet. And then all your ways will be sure.

And do not swerve to the right or to the left and turn your foot away from evil. Once you discover that you're on the wrong road, and once you are prepared and willing to listen to the voice of God and to come to Jesus Christ, because the path is only Jesus and a personal relationship with Him, what's the next step?

Well, the next step is what the Bible calls faith. There is only one way to live as a Christian. There's only one way to come to Jesus, and that is faith.

[15 : 39] What is faith? A lot of people are confused by this word faith. I remember being in Sunday school once, and it was put to me like this. I'm sure many of you have heard it.

Maybe some of the young ones want to pick this up and remember it. Faith is spelled this way. F-A-I-T-H. F-A-I-T-H.

That's how you spell faith. Now, I want you to remember this. F is for forsaking all, I take him. Remember that. Forsaking all, I take him. If you've got a notebook, write that down. Forsaking all, I take him.

And I've always remembered that. Ever since I was about 10 years old, I've always remembered that. Because that is, faith is perhaps one, is much more than that.

[16 : 40] But that's the essence of what faith is. That is what faith is in a nutshell. Because forsaking all means turning your back on your old life. And coming to Jesus means taking what Jesus has to give to you.

The Bible tells us that eternal life is a gift. It's not something you can work for or something you can earn. Being a Christian is not winning points for God.

It's not earning Tesco points or co-op points or whatever. It is a gift that God wants to give to you. And the greatest confusion that people encounter in their understanding of what a Christian is, is this very key point.

The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. And that means that today the gospel is about Jesus having died on the cross to give you this gift.

So the question before you this morning is this. Are you ready to forsake all? And take Jesus Christ as your Savior and your Lord.

[17 : 57] Forsaking all, I take him. Let's say you come to that point. Let's say you come to that point in your life where you say, I believe that I have taken and accepted Jesus as my Savior.

Very often it's just beyond that stage that people get confused. And they start really struggling with another voice that comes into them.

You know what that voice says? That voice says you haven't really done it. You haven't really accepted him. You're a fraud. You look at all these people in church around you on a Sunday. And look at the kind of lives they live. And he always makes their lives appear to be so much better in comparison with your life. It's not about what we live like. It's about Jesus.

Faith is Jesus. It's about keeping your eyes and your focus in Jesus. And the most crucial time to listen to these words, let your eyes look directly forward, is when you take him to be your Lord.

[19 : 03] Because then, often, all hell is let loose. And I mean that not in any way disrespectfully or irreverently. I mean that the powers of the devil are unleashed against anyone who is at that point of accepting Jesus Christ.

I can guarantee you, if you're at that point, then if you're hearing all these voices telling you, you can't live the Christian life. You're too weak to live the Christian life.

You can't accept Jesus as your Savior. God hasn't called you. He hasn't elected you. He'll tell you all the theology in the Bible to prevent you from accepting Jesus as your Savior and from preventing you to take that step forward into living the Christian life.

Keep your eyes forward. Keep your eyes looking to one place, and the one place is Jesus Christ. Let your eyes look directly forward and gaze.

Your gaze be straight before you. Ponder the path of your feet, and then all your ways will be sure. How do you take those steps forward?

[20 : 19] You take those steps forward by coming to God in the Bible. The Bible is God's Word to you. And as you accept Jesus as your Savior, listen, do this.

Open your Bible, and then perhaps for the first time ever, read the Bible as God speaking to you. And he says this, If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

And when you read those words, read them as God speaking to you. When Jesus says, Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

He's speaking to you. He's not speaking to the person next to you. He's speaking to you. And receive those words by faith. When we're told that the Son of Man came to seek and to save those who were lost, you are those who were lost.

You are amongst those who were lost. So take them to be your own and accept them by faith. Faith is taking what God has done for us to be our own.

[21 : 27] The only reason today that I believe that I'm a Christian is because the Bible tells me I'm a Christian. It's not necessarily because I always feel that I'm a Christian.

Very often I feel lousy. Sometimes I feel in darkness. Sometimes I doubt. I get plagued with doubts just the same as you do.

The same as I believe every Christian does of one kind or another. Every one of us is built differently. What do I do? I come to the Bible. And I believe the Bible. And I don't just believe the Bible in general.

I believe that in the Bible God speaks directly and personally to me. And that is where my encouragement lies. It's the only place that my encouragement lies.

And I believe that as a person moves on as a Christian, that you should make it known to someone else. Explain what you've been going through to a Christian friend.

[22 : 30] Someone who you know and you trust. And then come and join us in the other events that take place in the church.

Come and join us on a Wednesday night. I know that culturally here, when a person goes to the prayer meeting, it's seen as a great step forward.

And often people, they feel conspicuous about that. And it's prevented people from coming out on a Wednesday night because they don't want people talking about them.

And because they feel so conspicuous. But let me say, every church has its own culture. Every church has its own way of doing things. And even if people are going to say something, they'll only rejoice.

They'll only welcome you. They'll only be glad that you've come amongst them and started worshipping midweek. And what I say to people is always the same. Even if you don't know whether you're a Christian or not.

[23 : 32] There is nothing to prevent you from coming to the midweek service if that's what you want to do. And that's the only qualification. If you want to be there, then you come.

It doesn't matter what people say. It doesn't matter. You want to be there, then you come. And other people have a reticence.

They have a hesitation before they come to the Lord's Supper. I want to ask you today, at the beginning of 2012, have you been following Jesus?

Are you a follower of Jesus today? And you haven't made that public by sitting at the Lord's table. I hope that 2012 will be the year.

And I would like you to ask yourself this question this morning. That if I am following Jesus, if Jesus is my Savior, if He has died for my sins, whatever doubts and fears I might wrestle with, I'm going to take those steps forward because they're in obedience to Him.

[24 : 47] And you'll never find strength in staying on the outside. You'll find your strength by obeying Jesus and by doing what He wants us to do.

But this verse also applies to Christians as well as people who are at that threshold of commitment to Jesus.

It applies to those who have been following Jesus, perhaps for many, many years who are already on the road. There are important times in our lives for us to stop and to assess, to make an evaluation of whether or not we have somehow or other taken our eyes off Jesus.

Because that's possible. In fact, I guess that in most of our experiences that has happened from time to time. And this is perhaps a good opportunity under the guidance of this verse to ask ourselves, have I allowed myself to become distracted by other thoughts, by other distractions? Have I allowed myself to perhaps lapse into what Spurgeon calls retrospection? The retrospective person is the person who tends to dwell on the past, what they have done in the past, the events that they have known in the past, the events in which God has blessed them in the past, the good things in which God has revealed himself to them and guided them along the way in the past.

[26 : 26] Now, we're all built differently. Some people don't have this problem, but a lot of people do. There's nothing wrong with reflecting on what God has done in the past. Nothing wrong with that. But there is if we become obsessed with it.

And if that's the only thing we see, this verse tells us, let your eyes look forward. Because God still has a work for you to do.

And he still has a work which he will do in his church, in the gospel. He's still working and he's still moving. He may not do it exactly the same way as he's done it in the past because time moves on. But the gospel is the same. Jesus is the same. Yesterday, today, and forever. So if you're the kind of person that tends to dwell, to get lost in your memory of the past, then please stop.

And as well as thinking and thanking God for all that he's done for you in the past, move forward. Look forward. Pray forward. Take hold of Jesus afresh today.

[27 : 29] Because it's him and his strength that pulls us and leads us and guides us into an unknown future. Spurgeon also talks about the person who is obsessed with circumspection.

Do you know what that means? It means when we see around us and when we get distracted, like Peter, when he started walking on the water, he was in the boat, and he saw Jesus walking on the water and he said, Jesus, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water.

Jesus said, come. And he put his foot across and he discovered to his amazement that the water was hard or whatever, by whatever scientific means, God enabled him to walk on the water.

I don't know. He stepped on the water, put his two feet on the water and started walking towards Jesus and then something happened. You know what it was. He took his eyes off Jesus. He began to see the wind and the waves, the danger around him, and that was the point at which he sank. He began to sink. And that's the point at which you and I tend to begin to sink as well when we take our eyes away from looking forward to the destination that God has planned for us, which is in Jesus Christ.

[28 : 40] Taking our eyes off Jesus Christ. And you know what happens? We become disobedient when we take our eyes off Jesus. We become weak. I'm going to tell you about my surprise Christmas present this year, some of you know about, which I took a week to get accustomed to because when I saw this Christmas present, I'm afraid I was not very happy.

It was a dog. It took me a whole week to calm down. In any case, eventually I calmed down and I accepted the dog.

Started taking it out for walks. And amazing, isn't it, how many lessons the Lord teaches you. This dog is five months old.

It's just at the time where you have to train him. And of course, the basic command is to come here. Our dog, and he's called Dylan, he will come here as long as he's on the lead.

No problem. You give him a wee bit of leash and you tell him, come here, he'll come to you. When you let him off the lead, that's it. He's off. Do you know why?

[29 : 57] Because he sees other things. He'll get a smell a hundred yards away and he'll off, he'll go to the smell. You'll see another dog off, he'll go, and he'll call him and call him and call him.

And he won't come. Well, he will eventually, I promise you. But, at the moment, he won't. Because he's taking his eyes off his master. And that's what happens when we take our eyes off Jesus. We're distracted by a host of other things. Outward things, inward things. Christians were distracted all too easily by the kind of world we live.

If ever there was a day of distraction and if ever there was a day in which Christians were dangerously distracted and attracted by all the wrong things, it is 2012.

Keep your eyes looking directly forward. I'm not saying don't do anything else but read your Bible. I'm not saying that at all. Of course, God has given us a world to enjoy everything in its own place but keep your eyes directly forward and your gaze before you.

[31 : 11] Ponder the path of your feet and then all your ways will be sure. Today, we are being prospective. Not retrospective looking into the back.

Not circumspective looking around us and being distracted but we are being prospective. And we are looking forward. We're saying with Paul one thing I do forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.

I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Fixing your eyes on Jesus this year means this.

It means that I want to know about him more. Do you know what you have if you're a Christian today? Do you realize the treasure that is in your possession? It's an endless treasure.

It's a vast, vast inheritance that God has given you. And you haven't even begun to explore it yet. Don't just be content with saying, I'm a Christian.

[32 : 15] That's it. That's the end of the story. It's not the end of the story. Do you know in the Old Testament that when God commanded Moses to make the Ark of the Covenant, he commanded two angels to be fashioned out of the gold of the mercy seat.

And the angels were to look into, they were to be positioned looking into the Ark of the Covenant. They had to gaze into God's mercy and his grace.

And I would love for you this morning, if you're a Christian, if you're following Jesus, to make it your goal to gaze at the Gospel, to gaze at the Bible, to study the Bible, and to get to know your Savior more.

Because it is in getting to know the Savior more that we're strengthened as God's people. Even the angels make it their business to find out more about what God has done to save his people in Jesus Christ.

That is their great ambition. And I think it's a terrible indictment, isn't it? When the angels want to know more than you do. Or I do. So in 2012, will you join with me in saying, I want to know more about the Bible.

