

God's Rescue Services

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[0 : 00] Will you turn with me now please to the book of Proverbs, the Old Testament in the book of Proverbs and chapter 24. And we're going to look tonight at verses 11 and 12.

So that's Proverbs chapter 24 and verses 11 and 12. Rescue those who are being taken away to death.

Hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, behold, we did not know this, does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it? And will he not repay man according to his work? You're very familiar, of course, with the fact that the Bible gives us passages that are hugely stimulating, whether it be passages that challenge us or passages that comfort us and direct us and flood peace into our hearts.

And we need both. And God knew that we need both when he arranged the teaching that we have in the scriptures to be put together for our benefit.

[1 : 22] The passage we have here is certainly one that is challenging. And it's interesting that here in the book of Proverbs, sometimes, quite often indeed, you'll find as you go through it, that you have sometimes just individual verses that seem to be on their own and not necessarily arranged together.

But there are other passages that really just jump out at you and say, well, that's a unit of teaching. And I can see that that really stands out on its own, even if it's related to other teachings in the book of Proverbs as well.

The book of Proverbs is really a book of practical wisdom. It's much about wisdom. But wisdom in the teaching of the Bible is far more than just having intellectual acumen or an ability to think things through theologically.

Because although that's part of it, it's very much in the teaching of the Bible that our wisdom or the wisdom that's commended to us, the wisdom we receive from God is very much a practical thing. It's the wisdom as to how to live your life, how to relate to other people, how to be a Christian in the midst of a hostile world. These are the kind of things that you find in scripture associated with wisdom and how wisdom is lived out.

[2 : 35] And as part of that wisdom, here we have in the book of Proverbs in these two verses, a challenge to us to see ourselves as God's people, to see ourselves as God's rescue services.

God's rescue services. Because that's really what we're plunged right into. Rescue those who are being taken away to death.

Rescue them. Hold back those or restrain those who are stumbling to the slaughter. It's very pointed language. You might say, well, there's nothing much mentioned there about God or about the gospel or anything like that.

But this is really a general principle that applies to Christians, to God's people in every age, that they have a responsibility and indeed it's their privilege too, to regard those around them that are living without God as in need of rescue.

And to become and be themselves or see themselves indeed as they already are, as God's equipped people for rescuing those taken away to death.

[3 : 45] Now, as you know, the vast majority of social reform, of movements of that kind down through history, have been by Christian groups or Christian denominations or congregations and really proceeding largely out of Christian love and Christian compassion.

There is absolutely no way that secularism or atheism can actually compare itself in that regard, as in many other things, to the Christian gospel and to God's people who have engaged down through the years in very many different kinds of outreach and also of really rescuing people in need practically and spiritually as well.

That, of course, has involved things like tackling injustice, tackling oppression, tackling the kind of things that you find in our own society today with poverty, with debt, with all of these things. And we have a Christian duty, really, to see ourselves as God has equipped us and enabled us to actually attend to those matters with Christian compassion and with Christian principles. Because the world will not do that, even with its best intentions. And nowadays, as you're very well aware, the world is very largely concerned to leave out the Christian aspect of things, even when it comes to helping people in need.

[5 : 15] So we have to see ourselves as God's people in the world, as his rescue services. And, of course, that extends to the rescuing, to the reaching out or to seek the recovery of those who are not saved, those who are lost in sins and trespasses, without God, without hope in the world, all the kinds of descriptions you find in the Bible.

So that's really essentially how we should see the church. From this point of view, that one prominent aspect of it is that the church of God is really in the world the agency or the rescue services that God actually uses.

Now, rescue services, some of you are in some of the rescue services or emergency services, and by and large, you need to wait until your pager goes off, and then you're instantly leaving what you're doing.

You actually attend, whether it's a fire or whether it's any other sort of personnel in the emergency services. You then go and attend to what you're called out to.

You wait until the pager goes off. You wait until you're called. Then you instantly respond. We're grateful for all of those who do that. But in terms of God's people, you don't wait for the pager to go off.

[6 : 28] That's not what it's saying to us. It's saying, rescue them. Don't wait until you see the emergency. Don't wait until people come to you and ask for help with whatever it is. Do it in such a way, as we'll see in a minute, that first of all informs you about the need and then attends to whatever form of rescue that actually entails.

So here in verse 11, you have two positive commands, two imperatives, two positive commands. Rescue those who are being taken away to death.

That's the first one. And secondly, hold back. Restrain those who are stumbling to the slaughter.

There's the act of rescuing, the activity of rescuing, and there's the activity of restraining.

Of course, in saying all of that, you hardly need me to say this to you. We're not in the business of converting souls. We're not in the business of changing their hearts or their wills. Only God can do that.

But we are God's agents in evangelistic gospel work, practically and spiritually, as rescue services in the world, to reach out with the gospel and in every practical way to those who are in need of coming to know God in whatever circumstances of life they may be in.

[7 : 49] So look at the first of those positive commands, first of all. Rescue those who are being taken away to death or to the death. Being taken away has the idea of being led away.

It's something that's actually happening to them or being done to them. And you know yourselves from Scripture without digging in too much. You don't have to go very far in your knowledge.

It's part of the New Testament especially, to know that there is a very dark power holding people captive. That people who live without God are indeed under the power of satanic, devilish influence.

And it doesn't have to be something that's very obvious in a way that serves the devil openly. Just the way that Paul himself says in 2 Corinthians 4, For we know that if our gospel be hid, it is hid to those who are lost, in whom the God of this world has blinded the minds of those who believe not, lest the gospel of the glory of Christ should shine unto them.

That's what he's saying. Those who do not accept the gospel, those especially who are familiar with the gospel and with the church and their locality and who know of the pronouncements of the church and of the witness of people like yourselves.

[9 : 16] This is how Paul described, We know if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them who are lost and why are they lost. What's the influence at work in their lives? It is that the God of this world, this Satan, this devil, has blinded the minds through various agencies that he uses so that they, or lest the gospel of the glory of Christ should shine unto them, lest they have the light of the gospel to enlighten them and bring them out of their darkness.

Now sometimes, we really have to remind ourselves that that's where we were. Because after being delivered ourselves, yes, we still remember what we once were and that that's where we would have been but for this grace of God that rescued us, that took us out, that changed our lives.

But how many of us tonight are thankful for those of God's people who proved to be rescue agents in our experience, who spoke to us about God, who advised us of the most important issues in life, who brought us up as children or grandchildren and spoke to us about the faith that is in Christ Jesus and the importance of Christ and having our trust in the Lord.

I'm sure all of us, if most of us, can look back and say, well, I remember that influence. I remember how I felt when my mother or father or grandfather or whoever it was spoke to me about my needs and the need of my soul and counseled me against just becoming steeped in the world and forgetting the most important things.

And essentially, that's what it's saying to us here. Rescue. You rescue, it's saying, plural, you people of God rescue those who are being taken away to death.

[11:03] They're being led away. They're being led away by what they are actually blind to. They're not aware themselves. They're not conscious of the fact that this is what's happening in their lives.

How can they be? You and I weren't either until the Lord enlightened us. And that's what makes their situation so appallingly and sincerely solemn.

That they are being led away to the death. Now that, of course, doesn't mean that that's happening simply passively and they are not actively in any way engaged in that.

Remember that passage again in 2 Corinthians that we've quoted, in whom the God of this world has blinded the minds of those who believe not. And believing not is a choice.

It's an activity of that person's own mind and soul. And it's a deliberate activity on their part. They can't just say, well, I didn't know I was not believing. Because that's not what's happening.

[12:10] And you know and I know that nevertheless they are blinded to the reality of their situation even as they go on in their waywardness and life without God.

And it's impossible for us really to describe adequately the nature of that blindness, of that unbelief that we are all in until we're rescued out of it.

I heard somebody the other day just saying and discussing this person discussing their outlook on life and were saying I don't believe that there's anything at all beyond the present life.

Death is the end of it all. I don't believe there's such a being as God or any God. And then the person went on to say I don't delude myself with such ideas.

Now just listen to that. I don't delude myself with such ideas. That's the ultimate delusion. to think that you're not deluded when you say there is no God.

[13:23] Or that you're not deluded when you say you know these Christians okay they're fine as themselves they're free to choose to believe what they want but they're actually deluded because there is no God.

We know the reality of that because God has taken us out from that. And as he has done that he has placed us in the position of being rescuers. So here's his first command.

Rescue those who are being taken who are being led away to the death. And it's really in a sense it's really just bringing us to be reminded of what God himself does in saving sinners like you and I. And it's really language that takes you right back to the Exodus for one thing. Remember there how God revealed himself the people there in Egypt held captive slaves in Egypt so badly treated so pressed.

What did God say when he actually revealed himself and spoke from heaven to Moses? I have seen the affliction of my people and I have come down to deliver them to rescue them.

[14:27] And really what God is laying upon our hearts is what has God done in his salvation? What has he done in rescuing ourselves in delivering us?

Well now he's saying because I have saved you and rescued you I have made you in doing that I've made you into rescuers people who will go out as emergency services to those that you see still without God and without hope.

Now of course that means a whole application of a wide application of that principle and practice is not just simply speaking to them about Jesus and about God it doesn't leave that out but as we said at the beginning this really encapsulates both the spiritual and the social aspect of human life you deal with the issues around you as you see them as far as possible with debt with addictions with

poverty with all kinds of things where people live in neglect of what is most important and so often you find the world just so busy that they just don't have time even to contemplate and take in what is most important to them.

That's the first thing rescue those being led away and secondly hold back or restrain those who are stumbling to the slaughter and again it's using very pointed language stumbling to the slaughter just stumbling on as if they're not able to walk properly and you can see somebody who's physically stumbling and you say well that person's really going to fall unless something happens someone comes to support them they're just going to fall over they're going to injure themselves and I was saying spiritually that's exactly what it is like without God without salvation without being a Christian that's what's happening the person that's most unconscious of this stumbling tonight might be seen outwardly to be someone very very erect in their lives spiritually they're just stumbling on towards death and they're going to trip over if they're not rescued and fall into the pit of death that's why the language is so unrestrained and so direct and so graphic hold back restrain those who are stumbling to the slaughter in other words it's not just a matter of reaching out with a view to rescuing those who are being led to the slaughter there's also the element of restraining and that's where you find the Lord's people as an influence in the world as a restraining influence you'll probably remember back yourself to times when somebody of the

Lord's people didn't have to be an elder but somebody of the Lord's people might have been in your company or whatever so if you were used at that time to speaking in a worldly way or using bad language you were conscious of the fact that well here's somebody I better not do what I usually do in their presence I remember that very well as a young man with certain of the Lord's people as we whatever it was whether taking home pizza or whatever you watched what you said and you watched your language because there was a restraining influence doesn't mean we liked it as worldly people as we were then but we're very conscious of the fact that but for that we'd have just done our usual thing now you can extend that much beyond that sort of thing that I've mentioned because as you know in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and the chapter five you'll find that wonderful description that all of us know very well where God said to the disciples you are the salt of the earth you are the salt of the earth and all of us have heard an exposition of that many times I'm sure but nowadays when we're used to salt mainly as a flavoring for our food because you'll find people will say well that lacks seasoning there's not enough salt in it but in the old days certainly in the days of the

[18:37] Old Testament and even not so far back in our own history as a people salt was not used mainly as a flavoring it was used as a preservative it was used to stop foods from going bad from decay there were no other means of doing it didn't have deep freezes didn't have these sort of modern means of preventing food from becoming rotten so you had to preserve it and if you wanted meat for the winter and long term you had to rub the salt into the lumps of meat and then it was set aside and you could use it after months it was kept preserved by the salt same with fish the point is it had to be very thoroughly encased in the salt or the salt really rubbed into it and as the Lord's people are to act as a restraining influence as the salt of the earth that's exactly what we need to think about and that means actually really becoming involved in society people long ago used to think that the thing that was really necessary was just to withdraw from the world enter a monastery or just set up a group somewhere entirely away from the world's worldliness and from the way people lived and just be yourself as a commune draw aside from the world do your Bible study do your prayers follow out all of these patterns and the Bible tells us no that's not what the Lord is requiring of us he wants us to be involved in the world without being worldly he wants to really rub up against the world in its worldliness without Christian influence as the salt of the earth and to do that you need to be involved you need to think about how can

I be involved in my own locality in my own district in my own nation indeed how can I be involved for the Lord as a restraining influence to actually let my Christianity touch the rottenness of the world and try and act as a preservative as a preventative of things getting worse it's very obvious to us that those of a secularist or atheistic outlook have no hesitation whatsoever in being involved locally in so many things they want their influence to actually be an influence that's effective whether it's on a local committee or in council or whatever it is you can see it all around you even in our own locality these types of people the people who have that mindset have no sense of shame whatsoever in saying of course I want to be involved I want my world view to prevail

I want people to actually eject this Bible and its influence and I'm determined that I'll do as much as possible to bring that about you and I have to outdo that and if there's that much zeal in a secularist or an atheist you and I have to look at ourselves I especially look at myself and ask am I more zealous than that because I ought to be because I know the Lord and I have been rescued by him so that I become a member of the rescue services in this world for him Proverbs speaks about the slothful person later on in this chapter indeed it speaks about that you find it elsewhere as well when it says I passed by the field of a sluggard or a lazy man and the vineyard of a man lacking sense behold it was all overgrown with thorns the ground was covered with nettles its stone wall was broken down and I saw and considered and I looked and I received instruction and so on now you might say from that well that's somebody who's just completely lazy and by and large it is but you know in order to fit the whole idea of slothful or neglect of that kind in order to actually be slothful all I need to do basically is just omit the most important emphasis of my Christian life from being shown to the world and I'm being slothful I'll be guilty then under God of hiding my light under a bushel of not letting it shine in the world of not applying the salt of my life to the society that God has set me amongst this is a great challenge but what a great privilege it is as well to actually be for God the salt of the world the salt of the earth to be for the Lord the light of the world to be able for God to act against the pernicious influences of the day that are directed by the dark forces that want people to remain in the captivity of their sins you and I are God's counter to that God's counter culture to the worldliness that exists around us so these are the two positive commands and the time is largely gone but it's important that we look at them in a bit of detail rescue those being led away to the slaughter to death restrain those be a restraining influence use your

Christian influence where you can in order to seek to restrain to actually as it says here hold back and restrain the influences that are counter to the gospel and to people's benefits and then the second thing you have there along with two positive commands is no possible excuse verse 12 which really reinforces verse 11 if you say behold we did not know this does not he who weighs the heart perceive it does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it and will he not repay man according to his works now you see he's saying first of all well we might say here's an attempted get out by just saying well I didn't know I didn't know about that need next door or beside me or in my community or whatever and the Lord is saying if you say behold we did not know this does not he who weighs the heart perceive it is he going to let us off by saying

[25 : 11] Lord I just didn't know if we hadn't actually moved ourselves to find out and to inform ourselves by the many means we have nowadays to really know what's going on in our communities in education or in the council or wherever else it is that we need to be influential as Christians remember the good Samaritan we read in Luke chapter 10 and let me just briefly refer back to that and you see in looking at that passage it's really interesting how the Lord turned things and in many ways the best way of looking at the passage is not to begin with the question that he put to Jesus and who is my neighbor in verse 29 you'd be better actually looking at Jesus' question to him in verse 36 which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers he had begun here he's saying to

Jesus tell me who is my neighbor and that will help me and Jesus is saying you're putting things the wrong way around you mustn't say who is my neighbor instead of that you have to say who can I be a neighbor to today where must I exercise my neighborly love I don't wait until somebody tells me who my neighbor is and defines for me where I can show my love and then I'll not do much until that's shown no Jesus is saying you've actually got it the wrong way around he said to this man who now do you think was a neighbor to him who fell among thieves and of course he was trapped he had little option but to say well I suppose him that showed him the mercy and Jesus said well you're right you're absolutely spot on now go and do likewise you be a neighbor instead of asking who is my neighbor you be a neighbor to those that you know and can see are in need well here's the passage in Proverbs really pretty much saying that to us as well if you say behold we did not know does not he who weighs the heart perceive it we have so many ways of informing ourselves of our needs whether locally or others and you remember how

Jesus sent forth the disciples in John 20 verse 21 he says as the father sent me into the world even so I'm sending you I know that was to the apostles largely but nevertheless in principle it applies to us all as the father has sent him even so I'm sending you now these words even so are important there's a very very close parallel between the way in which Jesus was sent into the world that's to

say that he came as a servant and he was sent as a servant and he was sent to serve by the father and he was sent into a hostile world to be his servant there to be obedient to the command which he did to the fool now Jesus is saying as that was so with me so I'm sending you I'm sending you as my servants into this world to be my witnesses so there isn't really any excuse for us to say I just didn't know of course there will be things that we will not know we can't be informed about everything and the Lord isn't saying to us well unless you know everything that's going on in your community then frankly I'll find fault with you and you still don't have an excuse you can't of course know everything that's going on but if we don't set about trying to inform ourselves as much as possible of the needs of our day the Lord will come to us and say well I'm not going to accept your excuse that you didn't know if you didn't try to find out all of these practical things come into the passage one thing further because it's not just an attempted get out it's finishing by saying there's also the attempt of God does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it and will he not repay man according to his works now he weighs the heart and he keeps watch over your soul why does it say this does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it well it's it's more than just saying that

God knows our hearts and therefore will not let us off with any excuse that's not legitimate say more than that to us it's saying something like this to us does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it in other words is the fact that you know that God is looking after you is that not an incentive for you to be a means of rescuing others does the fact that you know God as your shepherd does it not instill in you a greater zeal to actually be rescue services for God in the world that's really I think what it's saying it's not just saying well if you don't do this and if you neglect this deliberately God's going to find out God knows about it anyway he's adding to that that's true but he's adding to that and saying God's looking after you so well God is your shepherd God is your friend

[30 : 51] God is your guardian and that itself ought to make us concerned and zealous to be his witnessing people in rescuing and restraining those that are in need around us in this life two positive commands and no possible excuse I'm not saying this tonight because I'm in any way convinced that you're not doing any of this of course not I'm addressing myself as much as any of yourselves but it's just a reminder to ourselves that here is our great challenge as well as our great privilege to be God's people in the world and to see ourselves as time goes on more and more as God's rescue services and I'm going to finish with a quote from John Piper from one of his books American author

John Piper who says the following and when I read this first of all I felt somehow or not sure I agree with it but then when you think about what he's saying you can get to the point he's raising have you he says ever wondered what it feels like to have a love for the lost in inverted commas this is a term we use as part of a Christian jargon many believers search their hearts in condemnation looking for the arrival of some feeling of benevolence that will propel them into bold evangelism it will never happen it is impossible to love the lost you can't feel deeply for an abstraction or a concept you would find it impossible to love deeply an unfamiliar individual portrayed in a photograph let alone a nation or a race or something as vague as all lost people don't wait for a feeling or love in order to share Christ with a stranger you already love your heavenly father and you know that this stranger is created by him but separated from him so take those first steps in evangelism because you love God it is not primarily out of compassion for humanity that we share our faith or pray for the lost it is first of all love for

God so it is not wrong though it seems difficult at first just to comprehend what he is saying it does not mean of course we don't love the lost those who are lost what he is saying is don't just generalize it love people love individuals but firstly go to them take the first steps in evangelism he says not out of compassion for them first and foremost but because you love God and because of God's love for you let's pray Lord our God we recognize the great challenge that your word sets us in so many facets of our life and while we find it so uncomfortable at times oh Lord to deal with these challenges and with these aspects of your word nevertheless we know that we are thankful for them that you stimulate us by them and that you call us to a closer walk with yourself through them and to a greater desire to be zealous for you in the work that we seek to do so bless to us we pray the message of your word this evening help us we pray to carry it forth in love for you and enable us as we love our fellow human beings and as we seek to love one another enable us to do it under our love for you and

Lord may that always be the chief motivating factor in our hearts that the love of God constrains us hear us we pray now and listen to the prayers of your people we ask it all for Jesus sake amen let's conclude now from psalm number 18 in the Scottish Psalter this time psalm 18 that's on page 222 and we'll sing verses 46 to 50 God lives blessed be my rock the God of my health praised be God doth avenge me and subdues the people under me he saves me from mine enemies yea thou hast lifted me above my foes and from the man of violence set me free therefore to thee will I give thanks the heathen folk among and to thy name o Lord I will sing praises in a song 46 through to the end of the psalm to his praise

God lives blessed be my rock the God of my health praised be God doth love me and love me and love me and subdues the people love me and love me and love me and he saves me from mine enemies yea thou has me and yea thou hast lifted me above my foes and from the man of violence set me free therefore for to thee will

[37 : 19] I give thanks the heathen folk among and to thy name o Lord I will sing praises in us the Lord he great deliverance gives his king he mercy doth extend to David his anointed one and his seed without end if you let me get to the main door please after the bend and now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always amen and and and and and and