

Recognising God in the Paths of Life

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 June 2023

Preacher: Rev James Maciver

[0 : 0 0] in at verse 5. Proverbs 3 at verse 5, trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths.

Proverbs is such a marvelous book in the way that it actually weaves the whole topic of wisdom into every avenue of life. Every single thread of wisdom that you find in the book of Proverbs and it's largely a book about wisdom and a definition in many ways of what wisdom is, where you find wisdom, how beneficial wisdom is and so on, the various descriptions that you find of it. But it's obvious that wisdom, the wisdom that God gives is something that's designed for every situation in life so that we can be the kind of people that bring glory and honor to God in the way we live out our lives in this world. And it's interesting as well, significant I think, that you find the figure of wisdom portrayed by the beautiful elegant woman that's sometimes mentioned throughout Proverbs and in chapter 31 especially is the figure of the woman who has such wonderful abilities and yet opposite to that you find the dark and the dangerous woman, the immoral woman, the woman foolishness, who is loud. And each of them in their own way call people to themselves and each of them find people responding to their call. That's why you see in the likes of chapter 9 here that the writer is actually setting that out in such a way after that a chapter dealing so specifically with wisdom. Wisdom has built her house. She has made a provision for a banquet. Whosoever is simple, let him turn in here. Come, she says, eat of my bread, drink of the wine I've mixed. Leave your simple ways and live and walk in the way of insight. And as you go on down, you find at verse 13 then, the woman folly or foolishness is loud. She is seductive. She knows nothing. She sits at the door of her house and she calls those who pass by.

Whoever is simple, let him turn in here. In other words, you have there really in that one chapter, the contrast between wisdom and foolishness. And what you find really is the practical aspects of wisdom and foolishness built into the whole book of Proverbs. And it's really saying to us, this is what you're facing in the world. And this is the kind of situation for which you need wisdom because you have these voices calling you in different directions. And the Lord gives the wisdom that we need to have and follow for our lives to be as they should be. Well, here you have a trust in the Lord with all your heart. Lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes. We often take these verses, rightly so, to be verses that are that are connected with guidance, the guidance that we seek from God, the guidance that we look for in our lives as they go on from day to day. But they're not specifically or they're not primarily verses about guidance, but they are verses that are filled with wonderful promises in regard to those who turn to

God for their wisdom and follow the ways of wisdom as he actually brings them into our notice. Now, you see this word acknowledge in all your ways. Acknowledge him. You come across words like that, of course, in the Bible. And you maybe first of all think of how do we use this word acknowledge in ordinary language in an everyday sense. The word acknowledge has a different meaning in different contexts. For example, you acknowledge a letter. We should acknowledge a letter. If it's a letter, especially an official letter, we send an acknowledgement that we've received it.

[4 : 1 2] Mostly nowadays, I'm sure it'll be text messages or emails, but the acknowledgement says, yes, I've received it. I acknowledge receipt of it. Also use the word acknowledge when somebody comes and says hello to you. Even if you don't know them well, if they say hello to you, know who you are, you know them. So you say this back and you're there for acknowledging them. You're acknowledging receipt of their welcome or whatever it is. And acknowledge too has the idea of sometimes used in the sense of actually admitting something. You'll find in a court situation, for example, for reports of events in courts, somebody will come to acknowledge that they did this, acknowledge their guilt. So acknowledge is used there in terms of confessing something. And it's

interesting that in the Gaelic translation of the Bible, that's actually the word that's used, *adiha*, confess the Lord. And that's a perfectly good translation of it as well. But the word *acknowledge*, as strictly speaking, comes from a Hebrew word, the Hebrew verb to know, which itself has a lot of various ways in which it's used in the Bible. But what the word *acknowledge*, you can see the word *know*, is actually in the middle of the word there. *Acknowledge* really means to get to know or to come to a familiarization with something. You *acknowledge* something, you get to know it, you become familiar with it. It's far more than just a casual acquaintance. It's far more than something that you just do by way of formal acknowledgement or confession. In other words, what it's really saying in verse 6 to us here is, in all your ways, take the knowledge of God with you or get to know God. In all your ways, recognize him.

That's another way of putting it. In all your ways, recognize the Lord. Give place to the Lord. Give him his rightful place. *Acknowledge* him. All of those shades of meanings, you could say, come into the use of the word *acknowledge* in that context. And the promises given to it are significant as well. He will make straight your paths. Now, we take the two verses together, indeed the first part of verse 7 as well, because we'll notice that there's a balance going on in these verses between one side of thing and another in terms of a contrast. Or sometimes it's just in relation of what's following on if you do a certain thing. First of all, there's recognizing God in the paths of life. Recognizing other need to recognize God, to get to know God, to *acknowledge* God in the paths of life. In all your ways, *acknowledge* him, and he will make straight your paths. In other words, as we *acknowledge* him, the promise is that we will be directed by him in the paths of life, but in a way that makes these paths straight. We'll see what that means in a moment. So recognizing God in the paths of life.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Do not lean on your own understanding. And it's put in the form of an imperative in the shape of a command. Do this. Trust in the Lord. Do not lean on your own understanding. *Acknowledge* him. And the fact that it's put as an imperative adds really a sense of urgency to it, doesn't it? When you come across something in the Bible that's put in the form of an imperative, you immediately say, well, there's an importance attached to this, and I ought to actually get down to reckon with it, to deal with what it's saying to me immediately. But you see, it's also not just an imperative. It's also repeated. In all your ways, go on *acknowledging* him. Trust in the Lord. Do not lean on your own understanding. It's not something you do once in a while. It's not something you do once, and then it follows on from that, even if you don't repeat it. When it says, do trust in the Lord with all your heart, it means go on trusting in the Lord.

When it means, in all your ways, *acknowledge* him, it means do this all the time. Go on doing this. It's part of the fabric of life. It applies to every circumstance. So what's involved in *acknowledging* the Lord in all our ways? What's involved? How does it relate to trusting in him with all our heart? Well, they're closely linked, these two verses. In fact, there's a balance in them. You can see there that the opposite of trusting in the Lord with all our heart is leaning on our own understanding. So the two things are put side by side so that you'll see them in a balance, and you'll see that on the one hand, it's the right thing to do. On the other hand, it's the opposite. It's the wrong thing to do. Trust in the Lord with all your heart.

[9 : 16] Do not lean on your own understanding. Not only that, but there's a balance in the following as well. In all your ways, *acknowledge* him is really an explanation of trusting in the Lord and not relying on your own understanding. The whole thing is wonderfully put together so that you find these different relationships between the different parts of the verse. So trust in the Lord with all your heart, in all your ways. You notice a repeating of the word *all* as well. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and in all your ways. *Acknowledge* him. There's a comprehensiveness about the whole thing as well. So when you come to put all that together, what you really find is the wisdom that God gives us that we seek from God is a wisdom that delivers you from self-trust, from leaning upon your own understanding. And it's an altogether easy thing to do, to lean on our own understanding. To actually come and say, well, this is really something I think

I should do in this way, or this is a decision I think I'm perfectly capable of taking, and just leaning upon our own understanding and our own wisdom. Ever since we fell in Eden, when we fell from the state in which God created us, we have that proneness to self-understanding, that proneness to our own human wisdom. And this is the counter to it. It's really a very practical verse. The counter to it, since leaning on our own understanding, is not just foolishness, but it's rebellion against God. In many ways, you can see the seed of that, at least, if not more, in the way that they succumbed,

Adam and Eve. Eve first, then Adam succumbed to the devil's temptation. Here was the devil coming with this alternative to what God had laid out for them, and both she and Adam afterwards leaned on their own understanding, leaned on their own understanding, and sought to use their own understanding instead of trusting in God. Trusting in the Lord with all your heart. Do not lean on your own understanding. And ever since then, this is what we actually find ourselves prone to do. And in fact, that's what you find when you're seeking to set out as a witness to the gospel, when you're witnessing to Jesus, when you're taking your Christianity and confession into the world. What you're facing all the time is people using their own understanding.

And in fact, you can't actually have anything but the wrong understanding, until in Christ and in succumbing and giving yourself to Christ, you actually move away from relying on your own understanding. And you come to follow the understanding of the Bible, the understanding of God himself, the understanding of the mind that has actually put the scripture together for us, the mind that is itself absolute wisdom. And that absolute wisdom is what's put this Bible in front of us and given us this word as a word of wisdom to us, the whole of it in its entirety.

And when you come to face those things in the world that tonight you know very well are so vehemently against the gospel, whether it's in human relationships, whether it's in human identity, whether it's in sexuality or identity in all of these aspects of human life, what you find in everything that's against the gospel, against the Lord's own description of God's word as to what actually gives people, human beings, their identity, what gives them maleness or femaleness, whether it's man or woman, there's the two. But when you find opposition to the Bible's teaching on that, what you're getting all the time is human wisdom. It's people leaning on their own understanding, and thinking, this is the only rule I need, this is the only understanding I need, and I'm perfectly capable of following this out, and I have every right to do it. See, that's the rebellious aspect of it as well. It just dismisses the Bible as in any way relevant to human life or to public life.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways, acknowledge him, know him, give him the recognition, and he will make straight your paths.

[14:00] Now, you see, it is, as we said, in all your ways, acknowledge him. We cannot be selective about it. It's not just coming to the Lord whenever we find the going really difficult.

It's not just coming to him when we have perplexed about a decision we have to take, or we think of it as a major decision compared to some other decisions of a lesser caliber, we might think.

We can't be selective. Every single step of life, everything along the path of life, the paths that he's talking about here that he will make straight, for all of that, for every step, we need the wisdom of God.

We need to be an acknowledgement of God, living in a knowing relationship with him, so that he will actually come and direct our path in the right way.

In other words, the wisdom that Proverbs, that's why the book of Proverbs talks about wisdom, presents wisdom to us, as something that is really imperative for the church, for our place in the church, for our role in the church, for wherever we are at work, whether we're employed or not, for family life, for leisure, for holidays, for every single aspect of life, every area of life.

[15:16] Proverbs is saying, this is God's provision for you. This is the wisdom. This is the acknowledgement of God that you take with you, so that you apply the wisdom that he himself has set out for us.

Our relationship with the Lord involves every aspect of life. We carry it into every situation. We don't leave it behind when we leave church, church meetings.

You know all of this already, of course, but the Bible so often repeats things or reiterate things for us or re-emphasizes things for us, things we know very well. And in fact, that's what the preaching of the gospel has to acknowledge.

It mustn't come and say, well, I preached on that maybe, or on that theme, preached on that maybe last month or the week before. If it's a theme that's prominent in the Bible, we need to keep coming back to it.

We need to come back to remind ourselves of its importance. And wisdom, this practical application of wisdom, is so important. In other words, recognizing God means actually recognizing and accepting his arrangement of life, his arrangement of the events of life, of each individual life.

[16:34] Remember Martha and Mary at the time that Lazarus, their brother, died. Jesus stayed for four days. He remained four days where he was, and eventually he made his way to them.

And when he spoke to Martha, you remember her words very well. If, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

I just think what that's saying. She wasn't finding fault with him. I don't think there might have been a little element of that, thinking that he could have made his way there earlier, but I don't think that's the main emphasis of it.

What he's really saying, what she was really saying was, it would think things would have worked out differently if only you had been here. Now, that's something that we ourselves apply so often in areas of life where we've got difficulty, trauma, tragedy, whatever.

We would like it to have been otherwise. If it had been left to our own arrangement, it would have been otherwise. If God had left us to actually decide how things took place and what things took place and how they were arranged in our lives, if the tapestry of our life had been left to our own wisdom, and if it hadn't quite been so difficult and so trying and so traumatic, well, wouldn't that have been better?

[17:59] No, God is saying, I'm the one whose wisdom has put it all together for you. And even though you know it as something that's trying and testing and difficult and challenging and hurtful, yet it belongs in the whole tapestry, as Donnie mentioned, the tapestry that God is weaving in the weaving of our lives.

And the tapestry, the underside of which appears somewhat confused to us, the underside as we look at it, as we are only able to look at it really from that point of view in this life, we would say, well, if only things were arranged differently, if only the pattern of my life was different.

Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But then the Lord reminds us, well, we need to acknowledge him in all our ways.

We need to give him the recognition. We need to give him his place. We need to give him what's due to him. We need to remember that we're not the wise ones running our own lives, though sometimes we may feel that it might have been better.

Of course it wouldn't have been better. Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him. And he will direct your paths.

[19:19] One of the wonderful things about Jesus, the Son of God in our nature, as you read about him in the Gospels, one of the wonderful things that are brought to us, to our notice about him, is how as a human being, he actually gave himself to the will of the Father.

And not only that, but he gave himself, when he was a boy, even to the rule and the authority of his parents. Remember, when he was lost, as far as his parents were concerned, Joseph and Mary, his mother and husband Joseph, there he was in the temple disputing with the doctors of the law.

And as they went to find him, they scolded him somewhat. Why was he? Why had he not gone? Why did he delay it? Why did he not come with them?

Do you not know? He said that I must be about my father's business. How does that chapter end though? Here he is telling them authoritatively what he's about, that he's actually in charge of the situation, that he's able in disputing with these doctors to show just something of his identity.

How does the chapter end? He went home and was subject to them. He went home and he was subject to them.

[20:40] He lived the life of a growing boy, subject to the authority of his parents, although he had the authority that was his as God.

And that's our example. That's the life that is directed by wisdom, by the practical effects of living in a way that does not lean on our own understanding, but actually trusts in the Lord with all our heart. So recognizing God in the paths of life, it's a huge challenge. It's a very difficult thing at times to do. It's a very difficult thing to acknowledge him in all our ways, to give him his place and to do so unreservedly.

This is what it's calling on us to do. And the promise to that is we will be directed by him. He will make straight your paths.

The words to make straight there literally mean to clear a way or to clear a route for somebody. It was a phrase used very often of important dignitaries or kings in Old Testament times.

[21:51] When they would be traveling somewhere, they would very often make sure that the way was clear, that there were no obstacles there that would endanger them or in any way be hampering their progress.

Make the way straight. Doesn't mean necessarily in a straight line at all, but it does mean make it straight in the sense of enabling progress to be made in it. And really that's what it means spiritually as well.

You remember Isaiah chapter 40 and verse 3 is a verse taken up by John the Baptist in his preliminaries before Jesus himself began his ministry.

What did John say about himself? Well, he actually said about himself using these words from Isaiah chapter 40. I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Make straight the paths of the Lord.

Prepare the way so that he will make progress in it. That's how it is spiritually as well. The very emphasis here is on God. He will make straight your paths.

[22 : 57] In all your ways, give him his place. Acknowledge him, know him, depend upon him, lean upon him, on his wisdom, and he will make straight your paths. He will actually make sure that you progress, that your life goes on positively and purposefully.

That doesn't mean that the way is going to be smooth. The straight way in which we make progress is not the way always filled with comfort, not the way that's filled with things which really cause us little trouble.

What it does mean is that he will ensure that as we trust in him and lean not on our own understanding, he will ensure that we do make progress even through and due to the difficulties. He will bless these to us. He will actually make sure that these, as we acknowledge him in them and give him his recognition and give him his rightful place, well, his promise is then, I will bless you even through these difficulties.

I will make them productive in your life. All of that is packed into what he really says here. It means that he will ensure we don't fall and come to ruin.

[24 : 15] He will make straight your paths. And he there in the text is emphatic. In the Hebrew text of the Bible here, in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths.

And that's such a forceful emphasis on that word, he, he will make straight your paths. Later in the chapter, you'll see it as we read through it.

You'll have noted how in verse 11, my son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof. For the Lord reproves him whom he loves as a father of the son in whom he delights.

These words, as you know, are taken up in Hebrews chapter 12, which refers to chastening or chastisement, where the Lord in his providence brings things about in our experience that do really hurt us, that cause us pain, that sometimes may even bewilder us with unexpected or sudden events.

But Hebrews 12, picking up this passage, these verses in verse 11 and 12 there, actually assure us that no chastening for the present seems to be joyous, but grievous.

[25 : 35] It does not feel as if this is going to be profitable. It does not really appear obvious at all how it fits into the Lord's way of directing us and making out paths straight.

But Hebrews goes on to say, no chastening seems for the present to be joyous, but grievous. Nevertheless, afterwards, it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness.

And what then? To all those who are exercised thereby. To all those who are exercised during the times that they find difficult in this life.

They are exercised. And because they're exercised, they're exercised in the sense of trusting in the Lord, acknowledging him in all their ways, not leaning on their own understanding. And that exercise really means that God follows at some point with the blessing that makes straight our paths.

Martin Lloyd-Jones, the late Martin Lloyd-Jones, Dr Lloyd-Jones wrote a small book, a very valuable book. And it's a book which deals with the likes of Hebrews, chapter 12, that passage of it dealing with the reproof of the Lord.

[26 : 59] And in that, if I remember rightly, that particular passage in Hebrews, he entitles the chapter in the Lord's gymnasium, in God's gymnasium.

The book itself is called Spiritual Depression. And he deals with certain aspects of spiritual depression.

And one of them, in one of these chapters, as I say, he takes this passage from Hebrews, acknowledging that it's chapter 3 as well of Proverbs, and he calls it in God's gymnasium.

And he lays particular emphasis on the fact that as you're in a gymnasium, in a gym, to actually exercise and to actually benefit from the exercise, so he is saying this is how we benefit from the Lord and acknowledging his ways and giving him his place and giving him his due. He will make straight our paths. We will be fitter coming out of the gymnasium than we're going into it. And this could do with a bit of gymnasium work physically as well, I'm sure.

[28 : 03] But this is, in a spiritual sense, so important that in the gymnasium, in God's providence, in the events of life as God arranges them, it's a place of exercise.

And it's a place of exercise where we don't lean on our own heart, on our own understanding, where we trust in the Lord, where we acknowledge him in all our ways, in all of these ways, and the promises he will make straight our paths.

The purpose of God is to make straight paths for us. And you could say that that really, in many ways, is an aspect of what Jesus called the narrow way.

To enter through the narrow gate into the narrow way. And the narrow way, in many respects, means some restrictions. It means some challenges that causes painful thoughts and decisions compared to the broad way where anything goes.

That most people walk in, as Jesus said, not easy to walk in, the narrow way, as you very well know. It's a place of exercise, a place of challenging, a place where faith is tested.

[29 : 16] But the purpose of God is to make straight our paths, to enable us to progress, to enable us to grow spiritually, to enable us to be of benefit to others, to enable us to comfort us, as 2 Corinthians 3 puts it, to comfort those who are themselves afflicted.

Because we have been comforted by God in our afflictions. What do we do with that comfort? We don't keep it to ourselves. We don't just speak into our own hearts. We actually use it, hopefully, in such a way that will benefit others.

We come alongside of them in order that they, too, may receive the comfort which we ourselves have received from the Lord. So here is recognizing God in the paths of life and also coming to be directed by God in the paths of life as all of that fits together.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways, acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths.

May he bless these words to us tonight. Let's pray. Lord, our God, we acknowledge at all times our need of your help. We thank you for the way in which your wisdom has arranged all things in the world that we belong to.

[30 : 39] And though, Lord, sometimes and very often we find it so frustrating, so difficult at times to make sense of things that happen around us, we also, Lord, know that in our own personal experiences.

We have experiences of pain, of trouble, of difficulty, of losses that we find at times difficult to accept. Forgive us, Lord, we pray, when we lean on our own understanding.

Forgive us when we fail to trust in you with all our heart. Forgive us when we go aside into what we ourselves might think would be the best way. and grant to us, Lord, daily that we will come to lean upon you and to trust in you and to commit all our way to you.

We pray that you'd continue to make our paths straight. Help us to progress from all that happens in life. Help us to progress spiritually and morally. Help us, Lord, we pray, to be more as we should be in our closeness of walk with you.

Help us to be of help to each other. Help us, Lord, to be of support to those we live with in this life, whether it be in our own domestic situation, in our place of work, or in the church.

[31 : 57] We thank you, Lord, for all that you provide for us to enable us to know your wisdom and to know understanding. Hear us then, we pray. Hear the prayers of your people everywhere tonight where your people gather, where people have called upon your name, as well as here, O Lord, we pray that you would hear the prayers of all those who were not heard in their prayers audibly, yet prayed, and go on praying to you.

We pray that all our prayers, Lord, will be recognized by you, and that you will come and answer us and show us so much good as you have done already, so that we may in straight paths progress onwards in our lives.

Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to come in.

We're going to come in.