

Wisdom for Life: Trust in the Lord

Proverbs 3

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on January 26, 2020

Introduction

- ❖ I've been excited about this sermon series in the book of Proverbs. I kick started it a few weeks ago, and there we explained how Proverbs is a book of wisdom. It's filled with words of insight. But it's not like some ancient books of wise sayings that read more like riddles. A lot of ancient proverbs sound really smart, but in the end, you're not really sure what they're talking about.
 - But if you spend time in Proverbs, you'll notice that it makes practical sense. It's not filled with a bunch of abstract theories or philosophies. **No, Proverbs is a book of practical wisdom. It gives you wisdom for life.**

- ❖ Now I made a point in my first message to define wisdom and distinguish it from knowledge or intellect. **Wisdom is not the mere acquisition of information.** That's what it means to be knowledgeable about a subject, but that doesn't mean you're wise in it. The example we gave was of a six-hundred pound man who might be knowledgeable in the principles of dieting. He could write a dieting book or give a lecture on it. He would be considered knowledgeable about the subject, but he wouldn't be called wise in it. **Because wisdom has to do with more than the mere acquisition of information. It includes knowing what to do with that information – applying it to your life.**
 - Why is Solomon considered a wise king? When we preached on 1 Kings 3, we saw Solomon described as the wisest king on earth (1 Kg 4:29-31). Is that because, over the course of his life, he wrote 3,000 proverbs and over 1,000 songs? Is it because he was so smart and could lecture brilliantly on a variety of subjects (1 Kg 4:32-33)? Now all of that is true, but that's not why Solomon is considered wise.
 - He's considered so wise because of what he can do with that big brain of his. **He knew how to use that knowledge for everyday life – to help him make decisions and judgments that are good and godly.** He's considered wise – not because he knows a thing or two about maternal instincts – but because he knew how to take that information and put it to good use in a challenging case where two women were claiming to be the mother of the same child (1 Kg 3:16-28).

- ❖ Is this really surprising? **I think all of us know really intelligent people – who are like genius-level smart – but at the same time, they make really unwise decisions in life.** They're super smart, but they're not wise. They still have to learn how to put all that knowledge to good use. What they need is wisdom – wisdom for life.
 - And let's be honest, there's a good chance that describes us. **Especially when it comes to the difference between being knowledgeable in the things of God and being wise in it.** For many of us, we've been in the church long enough that we know a lot about the Bible. We can ace a quiz on it. But are we wise in the things of Scripture? **We might be biblically smart, but that's not the same as biblically wise.**
 - When you're faced with a clear cut, black-and-white decision between sin or obedience, then you just need to be biblically smart. You just need to know what the Bible says about the issue. Which path leads to sin? Avoid it. Which path leads to obedience? Take it. **You don't need wisdom to handle a situation like that. You just need to be smart enough to know what the Bible says about it.**

- ❖ But it's too bad that most of life is not like that. **Most of the decisions and circumstances you're going to face are not clear cut.** You can't turn to a verse that's going to tell you what to do or which path to take. Often you're not dealing with a decision between right and wrong – but between good, better, and best. Or sometimes all the options are problematic – and you're just going to have to make due and choose the least bad path in front of you.
 - That's when being biblically smart is not enough. That's when you need to be biblically wise. That's when you need practical wisdom for life. That's what Proverbs is all about.

- ❖ **This morning I want to raise the question of how to get wisdom.** If wisdom is something all of us need, then how do we grow in it? How do we become biblically wiser people? Now when we looked at 1 Kings 3, it seems like Solomon just had to trust God would give it to him He prayed for it, and the next thing you know he's the wisest king on earth.
 - So it's easy to assume that that's how you get wisdom. Apparently, we need to stop overthinking everything. And just trust God. Stop trusting in your own understanding. Acknowledge him as the source of all wisdom, and he will make your path straight. In other words, he'll just tell you which path to take.

- ❖ You can hear echoes of Proverbs 3:5-6 in that. It's the most popular verses in the book. For many people, it's a favorite memory verse. **But my concern is that both 1 Kings 3 and Proverbs 3 have been misused to promote a view of gaining wisdom that's far too passive and far too mystical.** It's as if growing in wisdom means not thinking too hard with my mind and trusting more with my heart – as in simply waiting on God to mystically bypass my mind and understanding and send me the answer that I need in this or that situation.
 - I'm going to challenge that idea this morning, and instead I'm going to argue that wisdom is a learned skill. **It's a learned skill for navigating the uncertainties of life.** It's not a mystically downloaded set of instructions for what to do in each and every situation.

Wisdom is Learned Through Study and Memorizing God's Word

- ❖ Now please hear me – I do believe wisdom is a gift from God. God is the ultimate source of wisdom. So if you want to be biblically wise, you'll need to pray for it. Whatever you hear me say this morning, please don't come away with the impression that praying for wisdom and trusting God to grant it is somehow overly-pious and unnecessary. **All I'm saying is that praying and trusting for wisdom is not meant to encourage a passive, overly-pious attitude where you just sit back and wait for God to zap you with wisdom.**
 - If that's how you gain wisdom, then there really is no need for Solomon to have written Proverbs. He could've just given us a prayer to chant over and over again until God mystically downloads wisdom into our hearts. But no, instead he gave us this book filled with lessons we need to learn. We need to use our minds. This is the first point I want to get across: **Wisdom is not granted mystically as we sit back passively. Wisdom is a learned skill – learned through study and through memorizing God's Word.**

- ❖ Look at Proverbs 3:5 with me. “*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.*” **So here in v5, the idea of trusting in the LORD is set in contrast with leaning on your own understanding.** That word for “leaning on” means to fully rely on for support. It’s the word Naaman used to describe his master, the old king of Syria, leaning on his arm as he ushered him into the temple (2 Kg 5:18). He’s trusting Naaman to fully support him.
 - So to lean on your own understanding means you are fully relying on your understanding – your own innate, inborn, fallen wisdom – to guide you in life. That’s set in contrast to trusting in the LORD with all your heart. You have two options, two ways of life. **You can live your life relying fully on God – leaning with all your weight on him – or you can try to lean on yourself.** It’s obvious which way is wise and which is foolish. Just picture a drunk fool trying to support his own weight by leaning on himself.

- ❖ So the idea of trusting in the LORD’s understanding over your own is pretty clear. No real confusion there. **But the problem is we commonly interpret that to mean that we’re thinking too much.** That we’re too focused on the mind, and we need to lead with the heart. “*Trust in the LORD with all your heart*” seems to mean – have deep feelings of confidence that God’s going to take care of you and just tell you what to do when faced with uncertainty. Don’t think so hard; just trust. **But that way of reading v5 downplays the importance of learning and applying your mind. It breeds an unhealthy passivity where we expect God to zap us with wisdom.**

- ❖ I think a lot of the confusion is due to the way modern readers like us tend to associate the human heart with our feelings and the mind with our thinking. **So when it says to trust in the LORD with all your heart – we read that as a focus on feeling more than thinking.** But that’s not how an ancient reader would’ve read it.
 - Nowadays, we consider the heart to be the seat of emotions. When you feel, you feel in the heart, and when you think, you think in the head. We treat them separately. **But in ancient times, the heart was seen as the control center of your entire being.** Your heart is where you do your thinking, feeling, and deciding. So to trust God with all your heart is to trust him with not just your emotions – but with your thoughts and volition.

- ❖ So we shouldn’t read this verse as somehow downplaying the importance of critical thinking and learning – as a means to grow in wisdom. **Just think about the overall context of Proverbs where wisdom is presented as something you seek after with your mind.** Growing in wisdom is never presented as a passive activity where you just sit back and wait.
 - **Proverbs 2:4** tells us to seek wisdom like silver; to search for it like hidden treasure. The idea is that growing in wisdom will take effort. **Proverbs 6:21** says to bind your father’s commandments on your heart always; to tie them around your neck. **Proverbs 7:3** says the same thing – to bind them on your fingers; to write them on the tablet of your heart.
 - **Those proverbs are stressing the discipline of memorization.** To bind this teaching on your heart. To write it on the tablet of your heart. That means to memorize. To make an effort to not forget.

- ❖ Think about the context of Proverbs 3 itself. Look at vv1-4. They stress the same point to study God's Word; to memorize God's Word; to make every effort to not forget it. *"My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments³Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart."*
 - If you hope to grow in wisdom, then don't just sit back and wait for God to zap you with it. You need to apply your mind to study the teaching and commandments of God's Word. You need to hide them in your heart; bind them and write them on your heart – through memorization. **When God gives you wisdom – he doesn't bypass your mind. He starts with your mind.** Because when your mind is enlightened to grasp the truth; your affections are stirred to love the truth; and your will is activated to obey the truth.

- ❖ So let me ask you a question. The question is not: Do you need to grow in wisdom? I already know you do. I do too. The question is: **What are you doing to grow in wisdom? Are you regularly in the Word of God? Are you taking active steps to study it, to memorize it?** Consider, for the month of February, choosing a well-known chapter of Scripture – like Ephesians 1 or Romans 8 or Psalm 19 or Psalm 139 – and commit to reading it every day and committing the entire chapter to memory.
 - That's how you grow in wisdom. Not because you expect that a verse in one of those chapters will just so happen to instruct you on what to do in this or that decision. That's not how wisdom works. **Wisdom works when your heart is so leaning on and trusting in God; when your thinking, feeling, and deciding is so aligned with Scripture; when your mind is so saturated and renewed by the truth** – that you grow to know what is good, acceptable, and perfect. You grow to know how to discern God's will (Rom 12:2).

- ❖ Now look at v6, *"In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."* The one who is growing in wisdom is going to acknowledge God in all your ways. Now when you hear *"acknowledge him"*, don't think, "Oh that means acknowledge God's existence. Okay, I already do that." No, it means more than just believing God exists. **To acknowledge him in all your ways means there are no compartments in your life that are off limits to God.** It means you'll acknowledge him where ever you are, whatever you're doing.
 - It's like telling a man to acknowledge his wife while he's away on a business trip. It doesn't mean to just acknowledge that she exists. It means to acknowledge that your relationship to your wife affects all your ways, where ever you are, whatever you're doing, including your time away on a business trip.
 - When we acknowledge the LORD in all our ways – when we let our relationship with him affect and shape all our ways – then God will make our paths straight. Now that doesn't mean he'll make your life problem free – that life will be smooth sailing. **You might face bumps and obstacles on this path, but the point is that God will help you walk a morally straight path instead of a morally crooked one** (Prov 2:5; 21:8). He'll help you navigate a straight path through the obstacles by giving you the wisdom to know the right thing to do.

Wisdom is Learned Through Hardship and Receiving God's Discipline

- ❖ Now this idea that our lives are bound to have bumps and obstacles and that God making straight our path doesn't mean he's going to remove the problems. That leads to the second point I wanted to make: **Wisdom is not learned in a pain-free environment. Wisdom is learned through hardship and through receiving God's discipline.**
 - Look with me at v11. Commentators have noted that chapter 3 contains three sections that each start with Solomon directly addressing his son and telling him not to do something. So in v1, "*My son, do not forget my teaching.*" In v11, "*My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline.*" And in v21, "*My son, do not lose sight of these.*"
 - So let's focus now on v11. Let me read vv11-12, "*11My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, 12for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.*"

- ❖ The point here is so important to make because we so want it to not be true. **We don't want to hear that wisdom is a hard thing to come by.** We want to think it's easy. You just pray a prayer like Solomon; sit back; and wait for wisdom to fall upon you.
 - But what vv11-12 are saying is what we've been saying all along. Wisdom is a learned skill. It's a learned skill for navigating the uncertainties of life. **It's a skill for living a godly, morally straight life – lived with a healthy fear of the LORD, acknowledging him in all your ways. And the point here is that this skill is sharpened and honed through hardships and difficulties.**

- ❖ Just think about parenting. If you want your kid to grow and develop, to mature in wisdom – are you going to create a home environment that's discipline-free – where you never confront them for their foolish behavior? **Are you going to be that parent that intervenes all the time to remove any obstacle or any difficulty your child might face?** You do that and you'll have a child that's safely protected from the hardships of life. But you'll also have a child woefully ill-prepared to face life on her own. **She'll be overly coddled and underdeveloped.** She'll lack the practical wisdom to navigate the uncertainties of life.
 - Or just think about your own experience. When you think back to the seasons of life where you grew the most spiritually – when you learned big life lessons and became wiser – was it during a time in life when everything was going so smooth; when there were no challenges; when life was easy?
 - I doubt it. **I bet you if you look back, you'd agree you grew the most during times of hardship and difficulty – not during times of ease and comfort.** You became wiser because you were challenged – not because you were coddled.

- ❖ So I know when you hear v11 speak of the LORD's discipline and his reproof, it's easy to chafe at the idea. To despise the thought that God would challenge us, confront us, and purposely put us through hardships. **But v12 reminds us that it's done out of love – a fatherly love that wants his children to grow and mature in wisdom.**

- ❖ Of course, this means you first have to be one of his children. This is a *fatherly* love. **So to draw any comfort out of hardships, you need to be in relationship with God where he is your Father.** But that's not our natural state. No one is born a child of God. We're all born in sin, estranged from God. To be his child, you have to be born again. You need a second birth that comes through faith in his one and only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. **But the point here is that – once you have been born again and God is your Father – you can trust that he has a good purpose for the pain he's putting you through.**

- ❖ C.S. Lewis made this same point in his book *The Problem of Pain*. He says to imagine yourself as a picture and God is the artist. There are two types of pictures – quick, rough sketches and meticulous masterpieces.
 - Lewis says, *“Over a sketch made idly to amuse a child, an artist may not take much trouble; he may be content to let it go even though it is not exactly as he meant it to be. But over the great picture of his life ... he will take endless trouble—and would, doubtless, thereby give endless trouble to the picture if it were sentient [that is, if it were somehow alive and capable of thinking and feeling]. One can imagine a sentient picture, after being rubbed and scraped and re-commenced for the tenth time, wishing that it were only a thumbnail sketch whose making was over in a minute. In the same way, it is natural for us to wish that God had designed for us a less glorious and less arduous destiny; but then we are wishing not for more love but for less.”*

- ❖ Do you hear that? **When you wish for God to discipline you less and give you less hardships – you're wishing for him to love you less.** When God keeps challenging you and confronting you and putting you through suffering – it doesn't mean God hates you or has it out for you. If he did, then he wouldn't even bother with you.
 - The fact that he won't leave you alone; that he keeps working on you; disciplining you – what it should tell you is that you're not a quick, rough sketch in his eyes. You're a masterpiece. Or more accurately, you're part of a larger, grander masterpiece called the Church, God's workmanship in Christ (Eph 2:10).

- ❖ Christian, when you suffer, it doesn't signal that God loves you less. It shows that he loves you more – more than you can imagine. **He cherishes you as a masterpiece, as something valuable. Something he purchased with his most cherished possession, his beloved Son.**
 - The author of Hebrews makes the same connection in Hebrews 12. There he quotes Proverbs 3:11-12 and reminds Christians, who are going through hardship, that God is treating you as a good father treats his sons (Heb 12:5-7). He's disciplining you out of love. And he sets that exhortation in the context of *“looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”* (Heb 12:2).
 - When Jesus suffered in our place – the suffering he went through was punishment for sins, for our sins. He did it once and for all. And now because of what he endured on the cross, the suffering we go through can be considered discipline for holiness – discipline to make us wiser children of God.

Wisdom is Not Easy to Come By But It is the Most Rewarding Pursuit

- ❖ Now if you keep reading in Hebrews 12, the author gets real with us. He says in v11, *“For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant,”* so he’s not soft-pedaling God’s discipline. He acknowledges that it can be painful. It’s not a pleasant experience. But. He goes on to say, *“But later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”* This relates to the third point I want to make: **Wisdom is not easy to come by, but it is the most rewarding of pursuits.**

- ❖ As we briefly fly over the remaining verses in Proverbs 3, I want to stress the point that wisdom is not granted mystically as we sit back passively. **It’s gained by engaging our minds – learning Scripture, memorizing Scripture, allowing Scripture to permeate our worldview. And it’s not just the school of studies. To grow in wisdom, we’ll have to learn it in the school of suffering and discipline.**

- ❖ It’s a hard pursuit. But the pay off is worth it. **Notice how there are plenty of incentives for pursuing wisdom sprinkled throughout Proverbs 3.** Look at the text and follow along with me. In v2, we’re incentivized to grow in wisdom with the promise of long life and peace. In v4, we’re promised favor and good success in the sight of God and man. In v8, we’re promised healing and refreshment.
 - If you look down in v13, the blessings are more explicit. If you find wisdom and get understanding, you’ll be blessed in v14 with something more profitable than silver and gold; and in v15 with something more precious than jewels. In v16, we’re told that wisdom will confer riches, honor, and long life. In v17, it’ll lead you on pleasant and peaceful paths. And in v18, getting wisdom will bless you like a tree of life.
 - And then skip down to v21. In this third section marked by “My son”, Solomon says that if you keep sound wisdom and discretion, if you keep your eye on them, then you’ll have security. Look in v23, *“²³Then you will walk on your way securely, and your foot will not stumble. ²⁴If you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.”*

- ❖ Now these are huge incentives to grow in wisdom. These are really good reasons to pursue it. But be careful. **Be careful not to read them as absolute promises.** Proverbs aren’t meant to be read as absolute principles or promises. I think that’s the problem with prosperity gospel teaching – it misreads verses like these, treating them like ironclad absolutes.
 - **Proverbs are more like general principles or promises that are generally true.** These verses are not ruling out any exceptions. They’re just saying that life will generally go well for you the more you mature and become more biblically wise.

- ❖ **Imagine if you didn’t know how to drive a car or maintain one.** If you just sat back and assumed that all that wisdom for driving and maintaining a car will somehow magically or mystically come to you, then don’t be surprised when your car doesn’t fair well. If you drive poorly on the road you’ll have plenty of dents and dings. And if you fail to change your oil or replace your belts, then you’ll damage your engine and shorten the lifespan of your vehicle.

- But if you wised up and took the time to learn how to drive properly; if you learned how to properly service your vehicle; if you operated and maintained your car according to its design specifications and instruction manual – then you can generally expect your car to be in good condition and to generally drive well over a long span of time. That’s no absolute guarantee or promise. But it’s generally true – it’s a general truism.

- ❖ I think that’s what Proverbs 3 is trying to say. We are creatures made in God’s own image. **So he knows exactly how we were designed and how our lives were meant to be operated.** He also knows how to maintain our lives and keep them in good condition. And God graciously wrote down all of this for us in a book.
 - And if we study this book, if we learn this book, if we bind it and write it on our hearts – then we can generally expect our lives to stay in good condition and generally (dare I say) prosper over a long span of time. Of course, there’s no absolute guarantee. And as we’ve already said, they will be bumps and obstacles on the path. There will be pain and hardship. **But it’s fair to say that as you grow more biblically wise – as you increase in insight and discernment – then life will generally go well for you.** That’s the general truth, and that’s our incentive to pursue wisdom.