

Wisdom for Life: Hold Your Plans Loosely

Proverbs 16:1-4

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on May 3, 2020

Introduction

- ❖ I wonder – as you look back on the past couple months – **how many of your best-laid plans have either been canceled, postponed, upended, or overturned?** Maybe it was a vacation for Spring Break or this summer? Maybe you were going to travel to go see a friend or family member graduate? I know many couples in our church had planned a beautiful wedding ceremony for this time of year – but those plans were canceled or altered drastically. And I'm sure those of you who experienced a layoff or a rescinded job offer – never saw that coming. It certainly wasn't in your plans.

- ❖ **Friends, this morning we're going to look at a few proverbs that are all about making plans and seeking guidance.** When we had planned this series in Proverbs over six months ago, no one could've known how timely today's passage would be.
 - **All of us are being taught the hard lesson – whether we like it or not – that we are not sovereign over our schedules.** We don't have the power to make our plans come to fruition. When it comes to planning and making decisions – we are more helpless than we'd like to think. We're not in control.

- ❖ **If we could rewind the last two months, I'm sure you went into March with many plans in place.** Your schedule was full. I was in the process of planning two seminars and one retreat, and I was going to attend two conferences. They've all been canceled. My family and in-laws had a cruise planned for this summer. That's not happening anymore. **And I'm sure you have a similar story to tell – of best-laid plans waylaid by this pandemic.**
 - So we're all in the same boat. We're all dealing with the same disruption to our plans. And it's teaching us all the same lesson. **What I'd like to do today is to build on that lesson and to allow the scriptures to interpret our shared experience. I want to give you a biblical perspective on how to make plans in your life – knowing now the limits of your control.**
 - I see it as a real blessing that *now* none of us are under the illusion that we are sovereign over our schedules. And I hope we'll all be humbled enough to acknowledge that the Lord is. That's the testimony of the Church. **We worship and serve a Sovereign Lord.** Sovereign over us. Sovereign over our schedules and plans.

- ❖ So, as we look at our text – at Proverbs 16:1-4 – **I want to give you three takeaways for how we ought to make plans, knowing that we are servants of a Sovereign Lord.** First, we have to recognize the limits of our best-laid plans. Second, we have to check our attitude when making those plans. And third, we need to know where to rest our confidence once our plans are set.

Recognize the Limits of Your Best-Laid Plans

- ❖ So, let's start with our first point. **Recognize that your best-laid plans will only serve to advance the Lord's plans.** Recognize that you can make all the plans you want – you can fill up your calendar; you can set your goals; you can make your resolutions – **but for all the freedom we have to make *our* plans, in the end, we'll discover that we have been advancing *God's* plans.**

- ❖ That's the main point of these proverbs starting in v1 to v9. These two verses are similar, and they function like bookends. **They both address the relationship between our plans and God's sovereignty.** Here's v1, "*The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue (your speech) is from the LORD.*" And here's v9, "*The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.*"
 - So in both verses, we make plans in our heart. The heart was understood biblically to be the control center of a person, including our thoughts, emotions, and intent. *But* (notice that contrasting conjunction) the outcome is in God's control.
 - **The main idea is that the Lord is sovereign over all that you say or do. Your speech and your steps are ultimately established by God. They're directed by him to advance his plans.**

- ❖ Let's consider a biblical example. In John 11, right after Lazarus was raised from the dead, the Jewish high council convened to plot against Jesus. And as they bickered over what to do about him, Caiaphas the high priest spoke up. This is **John 11:49-53**, "⁴⁹*But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. ⁵⁰Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish."* ⁵¹*He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, ⁵²and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. ⁵³So from that day on they made plans to put him to death."*
 - Notice that **Caiaphas** spoke. He made a speech. Who knows if he came up with it on the spot or if he'd been mulling over it for a while. But he spoke, and he devised a plan to kill Jesus. But v51 says, "*He did not say this of his own accord.*" It says he had prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation. **So as he made *his* speech to argue for *his* plans to kill Jesus – the answer from his tongue was from the Lord.**
 - Or think of the OT prophet **Balaam** in Numbers 23-24. The king of Moab kept paying Balaam, trying to get the prophet to speak a curse against Israel. But each time Balaam spoke, the answer of the tongue turned into a blessing for Israel. **In the end, his speech only served to advance the Lord's plans.**

- ❖ That's what v1 implies about our words, and v9 draws the same implication when it comes to our actions. And listen to **Proverbs 19:21**, which says the Lord is sovereign over all our plans, "*Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.*" **Our best-laid plans only serve to advance the Lord's sovereign purposes.**

- But please hear me out: **These proverbs are not meant to discourage human planning, but they are meant to humble humans in their planning.** To remember that our plans will come to nothing if they're not established by the Lord.

- ❖ Now I understand that whenever you teach on divine sovereignty, it's going to raise sticky questions about human freedom. **If God is sovereign and if his purposes always stand, then are we able to form real plans and make genuine decisions? The biblical answer is yes.** The Bible sees no contradiction in affirming God's sovereignty over our plans AND our freedom to make plans.

- ❖ **The biblical portrait of humanity depicts us as free moral agents who are free to act upon our own desires and intentions.** Even though God is clearly portrayed as sovereign over all, we're not depicted as machines that just carry out pre-programmed instructions.
 - Think about it: **A machine is not a free moral agent. You don't hold a machine responsible if its programming fails. You hold the programmer responsible.** But according to Scripture, when human beings fail (when we sin), God is not held responsible – we are! We're judged for *our* sins. So the Bible treats us as free moral agents who are fully responsible for our actions. It doesn't treat us like machines.

- ❖ Just look our passage. Look at v2 again, "*All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the spirit.*" In other words, we always assume our motives are pure, but the Lord will be the one to weigh them. He'll test and judge our motives. But if that's true – if our motives matters – then that means God treats us as free moral agents. Both truths stand together: **The Lord is fully sovereign over our plans. And we are fully responsible for our plans (and our motives behind those plans).**

- ❖ What's going to help you reconcile these two truths is to return to that theological concept I've taught you before. It's called **the doctrine of concurrence**. If you've never heard of it, then maybe you've heard of the more well-known doctrine of providence.
 - Providence teaches that the Lord's sovereign hand directs all the events and outcomes of life. That's what we mean when we speak of God's providence working itself out in your life. **And now when you add the idea of concurrence, it basically explains how God's providence is compatible with human freedom and responsibility.**

- ❖ The word "concurrence" means "to run or flow together". **It's like when two or more currents flow concurrently in the same river.** The classic example is the story of Joseph. There were many currents of human intent taking place. The current of his brothers' evil intent. The current of the slave traders's actions. The current of Potiphar's wife's deception.
 - But not once did God violate human freedom. **In the end, all those currents – those multiple motives – flowed seamlessly together in the one river of God's providence.** All those characters meant evil against Joseph, but God meant it all for good (Gen 50:20).

- ❖ **Concurrence explains how God is able to work his hand in all things without forcing human hands against our will or excusing human hands from our responsibility.** This is why we're still responsible to make careful, thoughtful plans for the future.
 - **There's no excuse to resign yourself to a fatalistic determinism** – where you fall into passivity and don't put in the effort. No, you are still responsible to put in the hard work – to think carefully, to research your options, to solicit good advice, and to plan accordingly.

- ❖ If you don't know what you're going to do after graduation or after you retire; if you don't know where that relationship you're in is going; if you don't know when to start a family or how you're going to educate your kids (especially if this pandemic lasts through the summer) – **don't expect the answer to be written in the clouds or for God to drop preset plans in your lap.** You're going to have to make some plans.

Make Your Plans Carefully and Submissively

- ❖ But as servants of a Sovereign Lord, as we make these plans, we've got to recognize our limits – that our best-laid plans only serve to advance his sovereign purposes. Of course, we're still responsible to make plans, but this understanding of God's sovereignty should shape our attitude when making them.
 - So, that leads to our second point: **Make your plans carefully but then yield them submissively to the Lord's plans.** That is, make your thoughtful, careful plans – make decisions, form a game plan, create a timeline – but since you know the Lord is sovereign and directs all our plans, then we should ultimately yield them to God. Trusting him to establish our plans, while recognizing that he could change them.

- ❖ This is the attitude commended in v3. *“Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will be established.”* Some translations say your plans will “succeed” (NIV) or “be achieved” (CSB). That's if you commit your work or your plans to the Lord.
 - **That word for “commit” literally means to roll something.** It's used in the OT to describe rolling a stone, like the kind that would cover a well (Gen 29:3). So to commit your work to the Lord means – you do the hard work of planning and scheduling and mapping out a future for yourself – **but in the end, you roll those plans into God's hands to let him establish them or change them.**
 - To commit your work to the Lord is not about asking God to simply bless your plans. **It's about yielding your plans to him.** You've rolled them into his hands. That means you recognize that he has control over your plans.

- ❖ Here's a biblical example. **In 2 Samuel 7, we read about David making plans to build the Lord a temple in Jerusalem.** His motives are pure. It's for the glory of God's name. Even the prophet Nathan assumes it's God's will and blesses David's plans. But later that night, the Lord tells Nathan that that's not his sovereign plan and instructs him to tell David that you're not the one to build me a temple. Your offspring will build a house for my name (7:12-13).

- ❖ What does David do? Does he drop his plans because he doesn't get to be the one to build it? No, he yields his plans to the Lord and changes them. He prepares for his son to complete the project. **He's willing for someone else to get the credit for his good idea – and it's because he already yielded his plans to the Lord.**
 - Maybe you have some great ideas, some excellent plans – for your future; for your career; for your ministry. Friends, you can tell if you've committed those plans to the Lord – if you can carry out those plans, yielded to the possibility that you may not be the one who gets to see those plans succeed. Like David, you might be out of the picture when the Lord finally establishes those plans.
 - ***Are you willing to carry out your present plans, knowing that it might be your successor – someone who comes after you – who gets the credit for your good ideas?*** If not, then you've yet to commit your work to the Lord. You need to roll your plans into his sovereign hands, and **accept that what he might do with them – might not be what you expected.**

- ❖ **But if you've committed your plans to the Lord, then you can trust that he has a deeper, better plan at work in your life.** His sovereign plans probably involve details that you have yet to consider. Right now, you have no idea what he has in store for you next month – much less next year or five years down the road. **I think everyone in the world impacted by this pandemic will agree that no one can predict the Lord's sovereign plans.**

- ❖ That's why we shouldn't even try. **I think too many well-meaning Christians are wasting their time trying to decipher God's sovereign plan for their lives.** One reason why many of us want so badly to know his sovereign plans before they unfold – is because we lack the confidence to make decisions. We're gripped by fear and crippled by indecision. We won't make any plans until we feel like we know God's will for our lives.

- ❖ **If that describes you, then you need to realize that God's sovereign plans are typically not revealed in advance.** Sure, there were times in Scripture when he would reveal his plans in advance through prophecy. But most prophecy in the Bible was not predictive.
 - **Biblical prophecy, in essence, is not predictive but declarative.** It's fundamentally about "Thus says the Lord" – not "Thus predicts the Lord". The Lord's sovereign plans are usually reserved for the secret things that belong to him (Deut 29:29). But what he does reveal to us – he reveals in his Word. We call it his **moral will**. It pertains to his plans for how we ought to live in faithful obedience to his Word.

- ❖ What this means is that – if you're trying to make plans for your future but you feel crippled by indecision – don't spend all your time trying to discern God's sovereign plans that have yet to unfold. Focus instead on what's in front of you. **Focus on the Word of God that hopefully is regularly in front of you – so that you have a solid, working knowledge of his moral will.** Study the Scripture and ask yourself: ***What are the moral/biblical principles that he wants me to live by as one of his servants?***

- ❖ **And then, once you discern that, then make your future plans in accordance with those biblical principles.** And when your plans are set, then commit them to the Lord. Roll them into his hands. Yield to his sovereign will. **And accept the fact that he could either establish those plans or change them.** And more importantly, believe the promise that his sovereign plans are better for you – even if you can't see that right now.
- ❖ **One of the biggest spiritual lessons I've learned came about when God changed my best-laid plans.** When we got married over 15 years ago, my wife and I had plans for a large family. But those plans never came to fruition. We were gifted with one amazing daughter, but our plans for multiple children were never established.
 - And to be honest, both my wife and I struggled to believe that God's sovereign plan for our family was better than our own. And as I wrestled with God, asking difficult, bitter questions over a span of many years – one day, it struck me.
- ❖ **I was convicted by the realization that I had tried to play God.** I thought I was sovereign over my own schedule and plans for when to start a family and how large to make it. And I realized how bitter I was at God – that he would bless those who were less faithful to him (or even those who don't believe in him) with the very plans that I wanted for my life. **I came to the realization that I didn't really understand grace.** Now it's not like I believed in salvation by works – but I had assumed *God's blessings* by works.
 - I came to realize that I wouldn't have learned these lessons *unless* God – didn't establish my plans – and instead established his better plans for me and my family. I needed to change my perspective and the way I evaluated what's better and what's more important. ***What if growing my faith is better and more important than growing my family?*** That was a hard but needed lesson to learn.
- ❖ **The bottom line is that all of us need to be humbled in some way, shape, or form.** We need to learn that we are not sovereign over our plans – God is. **So, we should make our plans – but then hold them loosely.** That means to yield them submissively to the Lord and his better plans for us.

Rest in the Knowledge that Nothing can Thwart the Lord's Plans

- ❖ So, when it comes to making plans for the future, we've seen the need to recognize the limits of our best-laid plans, and then to make those plans carefully and submissively – yielding to the Lord's better plans. The last takeaway is about where we rest our confidence once our plans are set and we begin to chase them. This is our final point: **Rest in the knowledge that nothing can thwart the Lord's plans – not even the wicked and their wicked acts.**
 - We know, by now, that our plans can be overturned by God – as he's working for our good. **But we can rest assured that there is no chance that God's plans will be overturned.** By the will of evil men or even the devil himself.

- ❖ That's what we see in v4. Look at it with me, "*The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.*" **In other words, there is nothing in this world that is not God-ordained. Everything has a purpose.** Everything plays a part in the Lord's unfolding providence. Even the wicked and their wicked acts.
 - I like how one commentator puts it. He said, "*There are ultimately no loose ends in God's world: everything will be put to some use and matched with its proper fate.*" (Derek Kidner). There are no loose ends. Everything has a purpose. **That means nothing can thwart the purposes of God – not even sinful rebellion.**

- ❖ That's a comforting thought. It brings so much relief. **Because no matter how careful we make our plans or how much we commit them to the Lord – we know there are so many variables that could change things.** There are sinful people – including ourselves – that can mess plans up. And there are unforeseen events – from simple mishaps in life to life-altering pandemics – they can throw a wrench in our best-laid plans.
 - That's why it's so comforting to read in v4 that the Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked and their wicked acts. **Thank God that the sovereign plans of the Lord don't depend on everyone playing their part perfectly – on everyone sticking to the script and hitting their cues.** Thank God that he works well with bad actors.

- ❖ We've already seen this play out in all the drama in **Joseph's life** in the book of Genesis. His brothers and their wicked deeds were used by God to accomplish his greater purposes. What they meant for evil; God meant for good.
 - Think, as well, of **Habakkuk** and his complaint about the Babylonians. His short book is one sustain question of how a holy God could possibly use wicked people – like the Babylonians – to accomplish his good plans. But that's what God does, as we're told, in **Daniel 1:1-2**, "*1In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. 2And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand.*"
 - It was the Lord who gave the king Judah into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, the proud and wicked king of Babylon. **Clearly, God works with bad actors, and still his drama of redemption plays out perfectly, without a flaw.**

- ❖ **And, of course, this drama of redemption comes to a climax at the cross where Jesus was crucified by the hands of wicked men.** There were plenty of bad actors involved. Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Roman soldiers, the Jewish high council, and the bloodthirsty crowd. All of them acting against Jesus in their own way.
 - But listen to how the first Christians understood what took place. Listen to **Acts 4:27-28**, as the disciples are praying – they say, "*27for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.*"

- ❖ So each of these bad actors are either mocking Jesus; betraying him; abandoning him; torturing him; or executing him. But nobody's hand was forced. **Nobody was made to do what they didn't want to do.** Yet, in the end, they were all doing whatever God's hand and God's plan had predestined to take place. They were only serving to advance his purposes.

- ❖ **Friends, if God couldn't use bad people to accomplish his good plans, then we would all be without hope.** But the good news of the gospel is that God did use bad people to make salvation in Christ an accomplished reality. And he freely applies this salvation to bad people like us – to people who turn from their badness and trust in Christ for his goodness.

- ❖ **The cross of Christ is the clearest sign that the Lord is sovereign over all things, including evil.** And it proves, without a shadow of doubt, that nothing can thwart his plans. Not even the murder of his own Son.
 - **If he could accomplish so much good out of so much evil, then how much more can God work all things together for good in all the plans and details of your life.** That would include sins committed against you and even sins that you commit. It would include the loss of employment and even the loss of a loved one. It would include a pandemic that threatens to upend our way of life and even an uncertain future where we're not sure if things will ever go back to normal.
 - **Make your plans. Commit them to the Lord. And rest your confidence in the knowledge that his will will be done.**