

Wisdom For Life And Ministry

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.
(Proverbs 1:7 ESV)*

*Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof leads others astray.
(Proverbs 10:17 ESV)*

*‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.’
(Job 28:28 ESV)*

*The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.
(Matthew 12:42 ESV)*

The Path that Leads to Life

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Proverbs 3:1-12

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Introduction:

Good morning church. I'd like to invite you to open your Bibles to Proverbs chapter three.

The book of Proverbs is a collection of wisdom given from a father and mother to a son. This son is preparing to make his own way in this world. Mom and Dad won't be making his decisions any longer. So, they are entrusting their son with the most valuable thing in the world – instructions on how to live that are from God Himself.

Last week we read a poem in chapter two about the value of wisdom. We read about a path that leads to death, and a path that leads to life. We are all walking on one of those paths.

In today's text, Solomon describes in greater detail to his son the road that leads to life. Look with me now at chapter 3. We are beginning in verse 1 and we will read through to the end of verse 12. Hear now God's holy, inspired, wise, living and active word to us today:

My son, do not forget my teaching,
but let your heart keep my commandments,
² for length of days and years of life
and peace they will add to you.
³ Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you;
bind them around your neck;
write them on the tablet of your heart.
⁴ So you will find favor and good success
in the sight of God and man.

⁵ Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.
⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
⁷ Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.
⁸ It will be healing to your flesh
and refreshment to your bones.
⁹ Honor the Lord with your wealth
and with the firstfruits of all your produce;
¹⁰ then your barns will be filled with plenty,
and your vats will be bursting with wine.
¹¹ My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline
or be weary of his reproof,
¹² for the Lord reproves him whom he loves,
as a father the son in whom he delights. (Proverbs 3:1-12 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord – thanks be to God!

Now, these twelve verses are made up of six pairings. Verses 1 and 2 go together, as do 3 and 4, and it continues that way until verse 12. If you look closely at each pair, you will see that each one begins with an *instruction* and then ends with a *blessing*. That's the structure. As is often the case with poems, Solomon is actually only saying one thing here but he's shining light on that one thing from a variety of angles.

The one thing that he is saying is this: God's path is the way that leads to life and peace – so WALK ON IT!

That's it. God's way is right, and God's way leads to life so TRUST HIM. Trust him with your decisions; trust him with your money; trust him with your health; trust him with your relationships. He has GOT THIS. The one who is wise stays on this path!

Our text this morning is very practical. Solomon here teaches his son, and all of us by extension, how to stay on the path that leads to life.

How to Stay on the Path that Leads to Life:

The first thing we see in the text is that, if you want to stay on the path that leads to life you need to:

1. Learn, love and obey God's commandments

We see that in verses 1 and 3. Look there with me:

My son, do not forget my teaching,
but let your heart keep my commandments,

³ Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you;
bind them around your neck;

write them on the tablet of your heart. (Proverbs 3:1,3 ESV)

This is so critical. If God's word is going to equip us with everything that we need for life and peace then we need to GET IT INTO US!

That's what Solomon is saying here! He's telling his son not to forget; he's telling him to wear the word of God like a necklace and to write it on his heart – in other words, he's telling his son to take God's instructions with him as he goes into the world.

Imagine with me for a moment a student pilot. He sits down to study his operating manual and he casually flips the book open and puts his finger down on a random sentence. He reads six lines – seven if he's feeling ambitious – and then takes a moment to reflect on how the lines made him feel. Then he puts the book down and immediately forgets what he read and proceeds to CRASH HIS PLANE IN A BALL OF FLAMES! No flight student would ever do that! There is too much at stake! There are too many dangers in the air.

And yet how many of us disregard this manual that God has given us for life? We're facing daily dangers, toils and snares. Temptation is crying out to us; our hearts are lying to us and the enemy is laying traps for us.

The one who is wise will work HARD to get more and more wisdom into his head and his heart.

Here is a practical challenge for you: I want you to reflect on one struggle that you are facing in your life right now. It could be financial stress, marriage struggles, disobedient kids – whatever that struggle might be, I want you to find one or two verses in the Bible that speak to your circumstances and I want you to memorize them.

To that end, a friend of our church, Tim Kerr, wrote a book called Take Words With You where he has taken all of the promises that God has made to us in the Bible and sorted them by topic. So you could – hypothetically – look at the category of “children” and see all of God's promises relating to child rearing. If you want that resource, Tim has generously given us a number of books for free. They are on the back table and I would encourage you to take one and to use it.

But, of course, simply memorizing God's word is not enough. In verse 1 we are told not only to remember the commandments but also to obey them. Jumping back to the flight student, even if he faithfully read his manual and committed it to memory, it would do him no good if he got into the air and chose not to obey it. If he decided that he didn't feel like deploying the landing gear at the end of his flight he'd have the same result as if he never read the manual at all. The Apostle James tells us that merely *hearing* God's word is not enough. He writes:

But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (James 1:25 ESV)

We store God's word up in our hearts so as to OBEY. The blessing is in the obedience. And look at the blessings that we find in the text today in verses 2 and 4:

² for length of days and years of life
and peace they will add to you.

⁴ So you will find favor and good success
in the sight of God and man. (Proverbs 3:2,4)

Now, let's quickly remind ourselves that the blessings that we will be looking at today are *principles* not *promises*. Some righteous people have died young, and some godly folks have lived lives where they didn't receive much favor from their fellow man.

BUT.

I mentioned last week that I think we've possibly missed the mark on this recently. We have resisted the prosperity gospel because the prosperity gospel OVER-REALIZES some of the blessings that are ours in Christ – meaning – the Bible tells us that we will live forever with perfect health and wealth but we know that those promises are going to find their complete fulfillment AFTER this life. The prosperity gospel tells us that we are GUARANTEED to enjoy those blessings in this life if we have enough faith and that is a dangerous mistake. That is a gospel that is centered more on ME and what I can GET from Jesus when the true gospel is centered on JESUS and how he has saved me to glorify God forever.

But I worry that, in our response to that false teaching we have actually UNDER-REALIZED the blessings of God that come to us through obedience. Yes, the fullness is going to come to us on the other side of the grave. Yes, in this life we will have tribulations. BUT, the book of Proverbs teaches us that living God's way will generally lead to blessings now and ultimate blessing eternally.

We see that in these verses. It IS true that God has structured the universe in such a way that obedience will *generally* lead to longevity in life. Have you ever thought about that? Solomon goes on to say in verse 8:

⁸ It will be healing to your flesh
and refreshment to your bones. (Proverbs 3:8 ESV)

It only makes sense that obedience to God's commands would have a positive impact on our physical bodies – after all, God MADE these bodies, so He knows what is best for them. In fact, God's word protects us from many of the things that would shorten our lives. He warns us against drunkenness, thus sparing our liver. He warns us against over-eating thus sparing our arteries. He warns us against being anxious, thus sparing our heart. He warns us against laziness, sex outside of marriage, fighting, stealing someone else's wife and a plethora of other life-shortening decisions. Obeying God *generally* leads to a longer life now, and it *absolutely* leads to eternal life if we are in Christ!

It also leads *generally* to a more peaceful life. Now, we need to hold this in tension with what Jesus told his disciples, right? He told them:

¹⁸ “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. (John 15:18-19 ESV)

Yes. The world hated Jesus and so the world will hate his followers. BUT, it is also true that living

in obedience to God's law will *generally* cause us to grow in favor with the world around us. If you go to work each day with the work ethic that God prescribes, you will generally grow in favor with your employer. If you treat all people with dignity and humility as Jesus taught us, then you will generally grow in favor with your neighbors. If you are honest in all your dealings, then you will generally grow in favor with your customers.

But more importantly, living life God's way *absolutely* gives us peace with God forever! Do you remember what it was like when you were doing life your own way? Do you remember the dissonance that you constantly felt because you were doing things that you knew were wrong? The Bible tells us that God has written His law on our hearts, so in our disobedience we are acutely aware that we are not at peace with God.

But the one who walks on God's path – the one who puts his trust in the completed work of Christ – has peace and life FOREVER! Thanks be to God!

Second, if you want to stay on the path that leads to life:

2. Trust in the Lord with all your heart

Look with me at verses 5-7:

- ⁵ Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.
⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
⁷ Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. (Proverbs 3:5-7 ESV)

I suspect that there is nothing else in this text that is as counterintuitive for our culture as these three verses. The one who is truly wise does not “go with his gut.” He doesn't “listen to his heart.” He doesn't stand as judge over God's word. He humbles himself and invites God to stand in judgement over him. Bruce Waltke says it so well:

One is a fool to rely on his thimble of knowledge before its vast ocean or on his own understanding, which is often governed by irrational urges that he cannot control.¹

Here's a question: What is your first instinct when you are faced with an important decision? Do you bring it to God? Do you look to His word to see what He would have you do? Here's another way to ask that question: When faced with a challenge, what is more compelling to you? A solution found in the Scriptures, or a solution that appeals to your wisdom and knowledge?

Sin entered into the world when Adam and Eve rejected God's instruction and trusted in their own wisdom. God told them not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but they decided that they knew better. The result, of course, was death. Fast forward to the nation of Israel whom God had just delivered from their slavery in Egypt. He told them to take possession of the

¹ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 244.

Promised Land. So, they sent 12 spies to investigate and, upon seeing the giants that they would need to overcome, 10 of the spies trusted in their own wisdom and warned that the land could not be captured. The result? An entire generation of Israelites died in the wilderness without ever entering the land that God had prepared for them. The list goes on and on.

These Old Testament stories are not written to tickle our curiosity. They are written so that we might learn from the mistakes of our spiritual grandparents. We are inclined to trust in ourselves. We are inclined to leave the path that leads to life because we are inclined to think that we somehow know better. Like spiritual teenagers, we constantly push back against our heavenly Father's rules because we think we know it all.

But we don't, do we? We are not God. We didn't make this world. We didn't write the rules. He did. So, if we're going to stay on this path that leads to life, we're going to need to trust Him, even when the path takes some turns that aren't the turns that we would have chosen for ourselves.

Because that happens sometimes, right? This isn't unique to us; it is the consistent testimony all throughout Scripture. Sometimes God calls us to zig when we feel like we should zag.

I bet it was difficult for Joshua to trust the Lord when he was asked to march around Jericho seven times. Common sense was probably telling him to build siege ramps, but God told him to blow trumpets. That must have been a real test of faith. But the walls came tumbling down, didn't they?! And how much doubt did Gideon face when God told him to widdle his army down from 32,000 to 300 in advance of his battle with the Midianites. Can you imagine the pushback he would have received from those 300 soldiers? Yet God gave him a miraculous victory!

Sometimes it feels like God has us walking in circles, doesn't it? We find ourselves asking, "Is this really what I'm supposed to be doing? Can I really trust God with this decision?"

But, the one who is wise learns how to silence that voice. The one who is wise knows that God is going to finish what He started, even when it doesn't look like this path could possibly lead to our final destination. As it is said in a Portuguese proverb: "God writes straight with crooked lines."²

Third, if you want to stay on the path that leads to life:

3. Worship God with your first and best

That's what we find in verses 9-10:

- ⁹ Honor the Lord with your wealth
and with the firstfruits of all your produce;
- ¹⁰ then your barns will be filled with plenty,
and your vats will be bursting with wine.

Now, we are going to devote an entire sermon to the theme of money as it is represented in Proverbs, but for today we're simply going to whet our appetites. Solomon has a great deal more to say about the principles that govern wealth but his point in today's text is that your attitude

² Quoted in Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 245.

towards money is a great indicator of where you are truly placing your trust.

Here Solomon tells his son to surrender the first and the best of his wealth to God – literally the “firstfruits”. That’s important for us to hear, because it is all too easy for us to give God the “last fruits”. Think about it: We pay the rent, the hydro, the groceries, the gas, the spending account, the babysitter, the RESP, the RRSP, the student loans, Tim Hortons – and if there’s anything left over after all of that, we give it to God.

We can fall into that approach to money without even thinking. We are naturally going to put our money towards the important stuff first. Rent is important. Groceries are important.

But here’s where the rubber meets the road: Do you truly believe that everything that you have is from God, and that everything you will ever receive is going to come from God? That’s the testimony of the Bible. Do we believe it? Because, if we do, then shouldn’t honoring Him with our money be the very first thing on the list? That’s what “firstfruits” means.

And wouldn’t it make sense that because He makes the rules, He would reward those who are obedient and worshipful with their money? That’s what our text is saying this morning. And we find the same principle all over the Bible. Look at Malachi 3:

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. 11 I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts. 12 Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 3:10–12 ESV)

Here is the general principal: Honor the Lord with your wealth and He will provide for your needs. Matthew Henry notes here:

We mistake if we think that giving will undo us and make us poor. No, giving for God’s honor will make us rich. What we gave we have.³

God is no man’s debtor. You can trust Him with everything – including your wealth. Solomon teaches us here that the way that you think about and the way that you spend your money says a great deal about the path that you are on.

Finally, if you want to stay on the path that leads to life:

4. Submit to the Lord’s discipline

We find this in verses 11-12:

¹¹ My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline
or be weary of his reproof,

³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. 6 vols.; (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 17811.

¹² for the Lord reproves him whom he loves,
as a father the son in whom he delights. (Proverbs 3:11-12 ESV)

It's easy to trust God – or at least to convince yourself that you trust God – when the sun is shining and all is well. But are you able to trust Him when things don't go your way? I've had some difficult conversations over the years with people who have gone through some painful trials. I've heard many people question whether or not God truly loves them. They wonder out loud if He's truly good – because they can't reconcile the suffering that they're enduring with a good God.

But God presents Himself to us in Scripture as a Father, and a good Father knows that sometimes children need to experience adversity. One commentator wrote:

Prosperity and adversity are the wise and necessary mixture of the saint's condition.⁴

If we only ever experienced prosperity, we would get fat and lazy and we would forget God. That's exactly what Moses foresaw as he prepared to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. He warned them ahead of time:

¹¹ “Take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, ¹² lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, ¹³ and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴ then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Deuteronomy 8:11-14 ESV)

God loves us too much to allow us to fall so in love with the comforts of the world that we wind up losing our souls. We, as an affluent, prosperous people, should probably expect some prolonged seasons of adversity. Because God love us.

Wisdom recognizes that nothing touches us that did not first pass through the fingers of our wise and loving Father. Matthew Henry gives us some wise counsel here:

We must not despise an affliction, be it ever so light and short, as if it were not worth taking notice of, or as if it were not sent on an errand and therefore required no answer.⁵

Do you hear that? Every headache; every flu bug that passes through the family; every season of adversity that hits your business; every trial, tribulation, persecution and hardship that comes your way is being used by God to keep you on the path that leads to life and peace.

Sometimes these trials bring our sins to light so that we can repent. Other times, they give us an opportunity to grow in endurance or patience – areas in which we can't grow in seasons of ease.

⁴ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 249.

⁵ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. 6 vols.; (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 17813.

Your season of suffering isn't evidence that God doesn't love you. On the contrary! It is sure evidence that He DOES love you and that He is actively shaping and molding and pruning you.

How deep the Father's love for us! He has picked us up out of the muck and the mire and has set us on the path of life and peace. If you are not yet on the straight and narrow path:

¹⁷ The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let the one who hears say, "Come!" Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life. (Revelation 22:17 ESV)

It is not always an easy path. It is not always a painless path. But there is no other path on which I would rather walk. It is the way to a blessed life now, and GLORY in the age to come.

This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray together.