

# Bible Study

## Wisdom is the Principal Thing

(edited transcript)

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*"Wisdom is the principal thing"* (Proverbs 4:7)

Is wisdom, for you, the principal thing? I'm talking about the wisdom of God, not worldly wisdom which gets us absolutely nowhere. Whether or not the wisdom of God is the principal thing in your life is a big question, isn't it?

Proverbs is a very good book to work through to orient our minds and the way we think. Every sort of human behaviour can be seen in the books of Proverbs and Psalms - from the sickest and weirdest to the best and most godly. These two books describe all of us and all of what we can be at different times and give us the remedy, if we are not stiff-necked. If we *are* stiff-necked, standing on our own righteousness, we will be suddenly left without remedy (Proverbs 29:1). It's a terrible thing when you suddenly see something that's been dug in shift to destruction and there is nothing we can do because there is no redemption possible without a person in that

state crying out to God in total poverty of spirit, knowing they have no resources within themselves to recover. That cry, of course, is the beginning point of recovery.

### The Father's instruction

Because the wisdom of God is the principal thing, parents are endeavouring all the time to teach their children this wisdom.

*"Hear, o sons, the instruction of a father..."*  
(Proverbs 4:1)

The father whose instruction we are to hear is our Heavenly Father. When our Father in Heaven is teaching and chastening us, He is trying to get something through to our understanding. Like children who don't at first understand what is being said to them, we may try and distract His attention elsewhere, but our Father will bring us back to His point because He wants us to hear and purchase the understanding of what He's saying to us; of what has been delivered to us by those He sends.

It is not good enough for us just to agree with His word to us. We are to go and buy it and sell it not (Proverbs 23:23). That exhortation tells us that there is always a temptation, even when we buy the truth, to cave in and sell it when we're under pressure. Anybody under pressure can have a price. That's what the devil said about Job: 'Skin for skin. A man will give all he has to save his own life.' (Job 2:4). Of

course, we know that Job did not sell all. He endured, but he still had to come to his own repentance. His wife's recommendation to him, 'Curse God and die!' (Job 2:9) was only what can be at the bottom of *our* hearts when we're under extreme pressure. We can feel absolute desperation when nothing's working and we're suffering badly, thinking therefore that God is not real or that He certainly doesn't care about us.

But we've got to be delivered of that heart of unbelief that is the result of the failure of our *own* belief. That may well be what God is getting at through such pressure so that we turn to Him and come to know and believe the love that God has for us (1 John 4:16).

Having exhorted sons to hear the instruction of a father, the wise man continues:

*"...and give attention that you may gain understanding..."* (Proverbs 4:1)

We must give attention to gain understanding, to knowing how to purchase understanding by having the word, wisdom of God, becoming true in our lives. That requires attention, activity and commitment; and it requires prayer. Giving attention to something is to make it a priority.

*"...For I give you sound teaching; Do not abandon my instruction".* (Proverbs 4:2).

We would all say the Lord has given us sound doctrine, which is His teaching, and we have been instructed in His law which we are not to abandon or forsake. The Lord has given us the summary of His law which is:

*"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength and you shall love your neighbour as yourself."* (Mark 12:30-31).

Now, if you say that fast enough you won't realize that keeping His law, truly loving the Lord your God with *all* your mind, *all* your heart and *all* your soul, is impossible. We have to confess, 'There's the good doctrine but I can't do it. I'm going to need something from the Lord Himself'. Realising that is a point of wisdom, but agreeing with the doctrine and coming to that point of wisdom is not sufficient because it doesn't make the word true in us. We have to *purchase* it to truly understand it.

We've been talking lately about the Gospel many of us grew up with: 'Everyone sins but God loves us anyway'. Even if that were true, and ignoring the erroneous underlying implication of that belief ('so what I do doesn't really matter'), surely the Scriptures urge us beyond that position?

God desires us *not* to sin and has provided the way for our deliverance. Otherwise, we turn the Gospel into platitudes and self-righteous statements to justify ourselves. Wherever you feel pressed to justify yourself, you know you've got self-righteousness at work. Jesus made no attempt to justify Himself. When His accusers asked, 'Are you the king of the Jews?', He responded, 'It is as you've said.' (Matthew 27:11). He was not justifying Himself; that was no self-righteous position. There is no self-righteousness at all in Him who is the Truth. He is the truth and His words live and teach us.

### **His word abiding in us**

*"When I was a son to my father, tender and the only son in the sight of my mother, then he taught me and said to me, "Let your heart hold fast my words;"* (Proverbs 4:3-4).

This sounds like Jesus exhorting His disciples to let His words abide in them, and they in

Him so that they would bear fruit (John 15:7). Do we teach and instruct our children of all ages to make sure their hearts retain the word of the Lord, the words of wisdom that are coming to them? These are the words of life! We are not ministering laws to regulate their behaviour - the Lord is giving us the words of life (John 6:68).

*"...Keep my commands and you will live. Get wisdom! Get understanding!"* (Proverbs 4:4-5).

Do you see the exclamation marks the New King James translation puts after, 'Get wisdom! Get understanding!'? What does this double exclamation mean? Well, the getting of wisdom and understanding is their purchasing. Imagine going into a furniture shop to get a lounge suite without buying it. That would either produce disappointment or robbery, right? In a similar way, you can't just come to church and get understanding without buying it. The cost is your complete engagement, presenting yourself as an offering, a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God (Romans 12:1). He has redeemed you. He has called you by name and you can be confident that as you offer yourself to Him, you are going to prove the wisdom of God; it's going to become true and substantial in you as you present yourself and walk out your offering life (Romans 12:1-2). In this way, you will gain wisdom, and understanding, and your mind will be renewed.

Being transformed by the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:2) does not mean becoming a reformed character or model citizen by following a code of practice or a philosophy of life. It means walking on the pathway of eternal life.

## Giving attention to His word

*"Do not forget nor turn away from the words of my mouth"* (Proverbs 4:5)

These words are the spoken word of the Lord coming to us, and we must give careful attention to, and not refuse, Him who speaks (Hebrews 12:25). We *must* attend to the word of the Lord because that's the word of faith that's coming to us. Do not be careless and forget the word or turn away so you *can* forget! It is very easy to forget if we don't give attention to the word. Family devotions are not just for our children - they're for parents as well, so that we give attention to the word; so that we don't lose it, which if we're not careful we're just as likely to do as anyone else. We're not superhuman, or graduated, up-graded humans just because we're older. If anything, it's the other way around!

*"Do not forsake [wisdom], and she will guard you;"* (Proverbs 4:6)

The wisdom not to be forsaken is the wisdom of God that comes to us in the word of present truth and will preserve and look after us if we do not forsake it. However, if we forsake the word the Lord is delivering to us, what else do we have? Something over and above what God is pouring out to us that can sustain us? To prefer that kind of 'wisdom' would be delusional and in conflict with the word of God that really does keep us.

*"Love [wisdom], and she will watch over you".* (Proverbs 4:6)

It's good if you learn to love wisdom as a teenager, and preserve it in your heart, because our society promotes the idea that young people should embrace folly before they grow up. But, embracing folly, they *can't* grow up but become stuck in childish adulthood, always trying to prove themselves

to others. So, children and teenagers, don't embrace folly as your way of life as if folly is a normal and healthy part of your growing up. Of course, in your youth and inexperience you may do things that are foolish, but that is not embracing foolishness! You are intelligent with inherent dignity, not inherent foolishness. If you do something silly, then wisdom will ask, 'What did you learn from that?', and exhort you not to repeat the mistake but walk wisely.

This is *our* approach as sons of God who are being chastened by the Father. We learn from what is happening, not just 'toughing out' our suffering so that we can self-righteously proclaim, 'I'm strong - I got through that!' or tell someone else who's suffering that because we've been there and survived, they can too. (That is not testimony or help for a brother or sister who is suffering).

Speaking to young people, the wise man says:

*"Wisdom is the principal thing..."* (Proverbs 4:7)

Make the wisdom of God the principal thing in your life. Build it into your mindset. There are so many other things promoted as the principal thing. Parents, be careful you don't participate in the promotion. Depending on your family background, you may promote the right career, the best academic, sporting or musical results, living 'green' or some other achievement we value highly. It could be something quite quirky, glamorous or lofty, but in the end it's all the same to God and it all dies. Without being conscious of the fact, we can set things up as principal things for our young people, then when they pursue them over the life of God we're shocked. We've got to be very clear and very careful, because the principal thing for us truly is the wisdom of God.

## Buying understanding

*"...therefore, get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding"* (Proverbs 4:7)

This word 'get' is a word the Scriptures also use for 'buy' or 'redeem', even in relation to the Lord getting or redeeming His people. Think of a voucher you might receive. Your redemption of whatever the voucher entitles you to requires you to go and do something with the voucher. Without acting on the voucher, there will be no redemption or acquisition. It's a little bit like this with the wisdom God gives us. It's a gift, but He wants us to act on it, so we can acquire and live by it. His wisdom is true in Heaven and He wants it to be true in us so that His will is done on earth as it is in Heaven. His word comes down from Heaven to us. What is true in the Godhead, in the way They live, is to become true in us, in the way we live.

By gift, God says to us, 'Here is your wisdom voucher. Now go and redeem it'. We have short attention spans, so we hope that the voucher can be redeemed with minimal effort, like driving down the road to the local shops and saying, 'I'll have that please. Here's the voucher'. But sometimes the redemption journey is long. Maybe the shop is in Uzbekistan, we have to go on foot, and there's a very large and dangerous ocean in the way.

I'm being a bit flippant here to make the point: we think that because we've received and agree with the wisdom of God we therefore have the prize. But the Lord sets the course, the difficulty level and the time. To our minds, He should have come up with an easier way! If He wants us to have eternal life, why doesn't He just give it to us? Why not a simple miracle? He can do that - we have the faith for that! Or why not make the process short? Or

better still, why not remove the process altogether?

But in His wisdom and love He *has* given us the process; He has given us initiative to exercise so that endurance and patience are doing a perfect work within us. He wants relationship with us through that process and through the relationship with Him we discover and enter into along the way. He wants us to receive the joy of the Lord that comes to us as we receive, know and believe the love God has for us. *That* is the point about obtaining and purchasing wisdom and understanding! They minister joy to our hearts that *no one* can take from us.

*“The beginning of wisdom is: get wisdom; and with all your getting, get understanding. Exalt her and she will promote you...”*  
(Proverbs 4:7-8)

That echoes, ‘He gives grace to the humble’ (James 4:6), and He gives grace because the obtaining of wisdom happens through our humility as we come poor in spirit. If we’re exalting God’s wisdom, we’re promoting His wisdom and not ourselves. In contrast, our own wisdom only promotes us, with a payoff that others might think well of our flesh.

*“[Wisdom] will honour you if you embrace her. She will place on your head an ornament of grace;”* (Proverbs 4:8-9)

The wisdom of God gives grace to the humble but resists the proud (James 4:6). ‘The proud’ is us in our self-righteousness, proud of our imagined integrity, goodness and capacities, not joining the fellowship of Christ’s offering because we think we don’t need to be delivered from what was wrong, bad, unfair or treacherous. We’re sure we don’t need to repent - we need compensation. Proud, and so human!

## Fruitful testimony

Maturity, by definition, is a process. We don’t go to bed immature and wake up the next morning mature. Our maturity as Christians is forged in us by our purchasing of the word, resulting in our living testimony of the truth and reality of that word. *That’s* the testimony we share with others and that becomes the most powerful evangelistic tool that we have. Rather than telling people what’s objectively true we’re sharing with people what is subjectively true in us.

The Gospel we grew up with gave us the belief that Jesus died for our sins. That being true, we were supposed to run around telling other people that truth, with a bit of help from the Holy Spirit. We tried very hard to live up to the Gospel, but we never quite could, so we either resorted to pretending that, as Christians, we didn’t have as many problems as other people (and so became leaders), or that we had more problems than anyone else (and so became needy ministry recipients). Sadly, that’s not far from the state of popular religion. *But*, God is delivering us from *all* of that to a testimony of His life that is true in us and can be true in others. He is lighting us as true lights shining in the world and in our communities.

*“...a crown of glory [wisdom] will deliver to you.”* (Proverbs 4:9)

This crown of glory is our own sonship, the glory which is in the Son of God and that He bestows on us as a participation in His glory. Paul also tells us that we will share in His glory if indeed we suffer with Him, which is our participation with Him (Romans 8:17).

*“Hear, my son, and accept my sayings and the years of your life will be many. I have directed you in the way of wisdom; I have led you in upright paths”* (Proverbs 4:10-12)

This is making straight paths for our feet so that what is lame will not be turned out of the way (Hebrews 12:13). There is something lame in every one of us that under the pressure of suffering is going to be exposed. However, if we make upright, straight paths for our feet we can keep walking *in* the way of the Lord and won't be turned *out* of the way. Jesus came to heal the sick and the lame and the blind.

Alternatively, if when we suffer we allow ourselves to become bitter, angry or twisted inside, accusing those around us of being the problem and thinking there's some kind of conspiracy against us, then, like Esau, who fathered a whole nation of crazy people, we will end up persecuting believers. That is the spirit of antichrist that is already here and will rise up in times ahead. We need to be delivered of this and make straight paths for our feet, so that:

*"When you walk, your steps will not be impeded; and when you run, you will not stumble".* (Proverbs 4:12)

There is surefootedness on the pathway the Lord leads each one of us on, but that doesn't mean we will never make mistakes, or learn by them!

### Receiving instruction to walk

*"Take hold of instruction; do not let go".*  
(Proverbs 4:13)

Let me ask you, are you easily instructed? In our western world, most people are not easily instructed. The Australian culture is one that firmly rejects individual instruction. Cooperatives, working parties and encounter groups have the say so that no one feels spoken down to. Even our churches are full of people who will not be instructed and who

therefore are not receiving the wisdom of God. If we won't be taught, but insist we know everything we need to know because we have the Bible, we will not be able to walk in straight paths. You and I *need* instruction!

*"Guard [wisdom], for she is your life. Do not enter the path of the wicked and do not go in the way of evil men. Avoid it, do not pass by it;"* (Proverbs 4:13-15)

Young people, do not even go to the places worldly friends go and want you to go with them. Avoid them. Don't think you're so sophisticated that you can do any of the things they do without being affected. Older people, don't be so wise in your own eyes that you think you can be more sanctified than God. God doesn't go to those places, does He? They're called godless places for a reason! We can't be more sophisticated than the Holy Spirit, so don't try and take Him there. He will not be happy with that!

*"...Turn away from [the path of the wicked] and pass on".* (Proverbs 4:15)

That's simple. Just keep going in a straight line on the straight paths that God's wisdom is giving your feet, knowing that His way is the way you are going because to you, wisdom is the principal thing and wisdom is not deviating but taking you forward on the path of the righteous.

*"For they cannot sleep unless they do evil; and they are robbed of sleep unless they make someone stumble"*  
(Proverbs 4:16)

This attitude is the real spirit of antichrist that is out there, planning, 'If I'm going to go down, I'm going to take other people with me'. Don't touch that! We live in a wicked generation among wicked people, and we really are seeing the fulfillment of these Scriptures.

Therefore, we've got to know how to walk straight and keep straight paths for our feet.

*"For they eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence"* (Proverbs 4:17)

Where and with whom are we feeding? We need to have a care for what we're doing and who we're spending time with. Things that sneak up on us and drag people away from the Lord are at first very subtle, and usually look very good to the eyes of our flesh, promising to make us happy, wise, sophisticated and clever. In our insecurity, sense of inferiority or other lameness, the temptation to show off can be strong and cause us to be drawn away.

*"But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, that shines brighter and brighter until the perfect day"*. (Proverbs 4:18)

Walking on this pathway to the perfect day is the process of our redemption, purchasing understanding and maturity to which attaches the testimony of our life. The word of God's wisdom is becoming the ground of all our fellowship as His word works in us. Our testimony becomes, 'God delivered His word to me, and by His mercy this is what happened.'

You and I are here today because of the mercy of God, not because we're good, smart, clever or better than other people in society. We're here because of the mercy and love of God.

## Redeeming the time

What are we doing to redeem the time God has given us? We are exhorted by the Scripture to redeem the time because the days are evil (Ephesians 5:16). Such redemption is part of purchasing wisdom, not so we come under law or condemnation but so we know what we're doing and are doing what we're called to do. That's our joy!

*"The way of the wicked is like darkness; They do not know over what they stumble"*. (Proverbs 4:19)

Whenever we find ourselves stumbling about, confused and making mistakes, causing trouble, we have to come back and confess, 'I'm walking in my own darkness here, and that's wicked. Better get back on the pathway of the just and fulfil the righteousness of God instead of presenting my own righteousness as if it were His'.

*"My son, give attention to my words; Incline your ear to my sayings. Do not let them depart from your sight; Keep them in the midst of your heart"*. (Proverbs 4:20-21)

Because wisdom is the principal thing, it's going to take our application and attention to keep His word.

*"For [My words] are life to those who find them and health to all their body"*. (Proverbs 4:22)

The Scripture means exactly that. You can't die before your time if you are in Christ, and you can't make your time longer by any means. The word of the Lord is health to our flesh. He has our days numbered; He knows what they are (Psalm 139:16). We just need to walk in Him.

*"Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life"*. (Proverbs 4:23)

In our hearts are the things that will either be to the praise and glory of God, producing life, offering, fruitfulness and testimony, or, that will corrupt us. In the issues of life, the things that are going on, what are you taking in and absorbing? What is your priority?

The word we have received truly *is* sufficient. We take it home, have devotions, pray and seek our Lord through the week. Things are happening, difficulties are arising, and God is working on us. We may find some of His

dealings very hard, taking us to places we don't want to go, but that's the love of God at work. He doesn't abandon us, but loves us, and is dealing with the corrupt garbage in our hearts by His circumcising hand.

### Speaking to one another

*"Put away from you a deceitful mouth and put devious speech far from you". (Proverbs 4:24)*

A deceitful mouth and devious speech don't only describe someone telling fibs. It can be engaging in gossip or in other people's or your own speculations. A deceitful mouth projects and pretends, not being true to people, telling them what they want to hear or what we want them to believe. We need to put such ways of conversation completely and afar off.

*"Let your eyes look directly ahead and let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you. Watch the path of your feet and all your ways will be established". (Proverbs 4:25-26)*

Walking and staying on this straight path take application and fellowship with those who fear the Lord and speak to one another of the word the Lord is delivering to them (Malachi 3:16). This is not mere socialising, although it is good to spend time relaxing together as brethren, but we know that what grounds and binds us together as brethren is the word and love of God.

*"Do not turn to the right nor to the left; Turn your foot from evil." (Proverbs 4:27)*

Sometimes, doing this can be quite dramatic, requiring us to take immediate action to get out of a place or situation. It's what Joseph had to do in response to Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39). He didn't stop to negotiate - he ran, leaving his coat in her clutch. That flight led to his imprisonment. It appeared that he was damned either way - if he fell or because

he didn't. However, it was God who authored Joseph's jail term so he could make straight paths for his feet, keeping them from slipping and turning him out of the way.

Unjustly jailed for three years in a comfortless Egyptian prison that was no doubt hostile to him in the extreme, Joseph could easily have slipped into depression, fury and bitterness but did not. And in God's time, when Joseph had purchased the wisdom and understanding of the word of the Lord he had received as a young man, the Lord delivered him. He was able, on straight paths, to go and do the job he was called by God to do - redeem and keep Israel, the people of God.

It was through Joseph's work and ministry, flowing from his purchasing of wisdom and getting of understanding, that the fledgling nation of Israel went down into the fiery furnace of Egypt and came out years later a mighty nation.