

# PROVERBS



You've seen them on TV. You've heard them offer a better version of yourself. Positive thinking, a healthy body, a vision where you can overcome any obstacle. From Benny Hinn to Joyce Meyer, the power of positive thinking and having enough faith has become an American form of religion that people are offered with the hope of a better future.

But after facing some strong criticisms, another generation of positive thinkers has come along to offer a different kind of prosperous lifestyle – prosperity lite a la Joel Osteen. You can have *Your Best Life Now* and the promise of *Every Day Friday* have sold millions of copies. This version of American Christianity has been exported around the world and appeals to many, telling them that if they would have enough faith that they can have so much more!

The prosperity message is appealing for two reasons. First, it is reflected in Scripture. We see in our passage from Proverbs 3 that there is the offer of long life (v. 2), favour and good success (v. 4), straight paths (v. 6), healing and refreshment (v. 8), and abundance (v. 10). Scripture is full of this idea – that you will reap what you sow.

At the same time, the prosperity message appeals to our flesh because the offer of the prosperity message is that you can have it all now! God becomes the cosmic candy dispenser, the treat machine who offers you everything now! The best life now, every day Friday – it sounds so good, until you face the reality of life and the rest of your Bible. If this is the best life now, is there anything better ahead? And if every day is Friday, why do Christians gather to celebrate Good Friday – it wasn't that good for Jesus, was it?

If Proverbs 2 told us how to guard the good life, Proverbs 3 shows us how to have the good long life of favour, success, straight paths, healing, refreshment, and abundance. Yet it isn't in the life that avoids trouble but faces it head on. It doesn't see suffering or hardships as a lack of faith, but understands it in the context of the good life. So what is the best life that God offers us?

## **Keep on Holding on (3:1-4)**

The best life that God offers to us is rooted in Scripture. We can see that the teachings of the father are rooted in Scripture. Just the language that is used here is similar to how God acts as Father to his people. There are laws, commands, rooted in steadfast love and faithfulness. So part of the aim of the father is to teach his son how to become like God.

What the father teaches is connected to the fifth commandment in Exod. 20:12 – that honouring your father and mother would result in long life in the land. But what the father says is that there is more than long life: what is offered is *shalom*. This Hebrew word is translated here as peace, but it has the idea of complete well-being, of wholeness.

The best life that is offered begins with holding on to the commands of his father that are rooted in God's eternal word. He is to bind them to his neck. Just as God had told Israel to write the commands on their doorposts and carry them close to their hearts (Deut. 6:8-9), so here the son is told to bind the very character of God to his neck – steadfast love and kindness. This was the

# PROVERBS



language God used to describe himself after Israel had been stiff-necked and worshipped other gods (see Exod. 34:6 – steadfast love and kindness for a stiff-necked people – Exod. 34:9).

The result of keeping and holding on to the commands is favour with God and men (v. 4). So much of what roots us, what helps us deal with our anxious age, what keeps us believing the best about others and what helps us to relate to God and fellow people is to know the commands of God and to walk in them. The best life isn't found by throwing off what God has said, but embracing what he has said and believing that he has sent his Son so that you would have life and life to the full (Jn. 10:10).

## Body – Trust, Fear, Honour

Three commands come to us here that tell us how we move towards the good life. What the Lord offers are straight paths (v. 6), healing and refreshment (v. 8), and abundance (v. 10). This sounds like an amazing offer!

But before we get to the benefits of wisdom, we need to make one thing clear – these are the GENERAL benefits of wisdom, not the promises of wisdom. Proverbs speaks about general truths. It isn't promising that if you do this, then you will be guaranteed that. We will see why this is the case in a few minutes.

Three commands root us in the good life. Trust the Lord with all your heart. Verses 5-6 are probably the most famous verses in the entire book. They root us on the two paths. They keep us grounded, reminding us that there's a way that seems right to a man, but it leads to death (14:12; 16:25). So trusting in the Lord is not relying upon our wisdom. It takes us back to the father's instruction. Trusting in the Lord means trusting and obeying his commands. The commands of God are intended to lead you into the good life. They are intended to teach you the way to life is only found in paths that lead straight toward him.

What Proverbs 3:5-6 are commending to us, then, is that we follow God's commands. That we listen to the instruction of godly parental figures. That we find that there is life in the commands. God's commands are not killjoy commands. He doesn't tell us to do this and not do that to steal joy, but because he knows that joy is stolen by not following his ways.

The second command in v. 7 is to fear the Lord rather than being wise in your own eyes. Proverbs wants us to walk in the fear of the Lord (1:7; 9:10) – and the fear of the Lord is a life of constant realigning our lives with God's ways. This is called repentance. Repentance is the life-long practice of the Christian. Instead of being wise in our own eyes, we are to find favour in the eyes of the Lord (v. 4).

How do God's commands bring us into life? It might be easier to see it from the opposite perspective. What happens when you're in sin? Sin appeals to our loneliness, our anxiousness, our need for attention, fame, success. Sin appeals to us and says that it offers us the easy path to favour and success.

# PROVERBS



But the fear of the Lord offers us a better way. When we have a healthy respect and honour for God – that’s what fearing him means – we see clearly that his commands are not to crush and destroy us, but to give us life. He doesn’t want us to be anxious; he wants us to trust him as the ruler of all creation. He doesn’t want us feeling lonely; he wants us to see that no human relationship will completely satisfy us without him. He doesn’t want us finding attention and value apart from him; he wants us to see that his steadfast love is enough for us. The more we know the Lord, the more we find that there is rest in the soul.

Sin is described in Psalm 32 as being weariness to the bones. It dries up the soul. It sucks the life out of you. It promises you the world but leaves you empty. It says that God is withholding the good life from you only to offer you a cheap substitute that’s a knock-off that breaks down.

The way that we show that we trust and fear the Lord is that we honour him with our wealth. This is the command of v. 9 – to give him the first of what we have. When we trust him, when we respect him, we will honour him with the first of what we have. We take from the top, not the bottom, of our pay. We tithe first, not last. We give him from our best, not from our leftovers.

My dad instilled the practice of tithing in me. Every Sunday he taught us to give to the Lord. He taught us to honour the Lord with the first of our allowance. This was his practice. Even when things were tight, dad still tithed first. And he would remind us that we can’t out-give God. When we give back to the Lord, we are saying that his generosity is more than we could have ever fathomed. When we give to the Lord, we are saying that we trust him to live off of 90% rather than 100%. When we give to the Lord, we are saying that we want to become generous like God is generous.

The principle is that when we trust and respect the Lord, when we honour him, He is pleased to bless us, to give us the abundant life. The Old Testament made it clear that to live long in the land and to live obediently would bring blessing on the earth.

And in some senses, we know this to be true. When we care for this planet, when we honour the creation, when we work sustainable practices of industry and agriculture, it is good for the environment. When we exploit the earth, the planet suffers and we suffer too.

The goal in vv. 5-10 is to encourage us that wisdom is a fruitful pursuit. It leads you to the good life with straight paths and healing to the bones and abundance.

## **Receive Discipline (3:11-12)**

But so far, everything we have read and heard doesn’t sound like it denies the prosperity gospel. Abundance, health, favour – all things that popular preachers and teachers offer. But here is where the tone changes. The Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father disciplines a son, and notice the language – the son in whom he *delights*.

So much of the health and wealth gospel, the prosperity message is rooted in your best life now, you having everything in abundance now, free from suffering now. It tells you that you need more

# PROVERBS



faith. And it sounds like Proverbs 3:1-10. But what Proverbs 3:11-12 tells us is that your suffering is actually part of the Lord's love. He doesn't willingly afflict you (see Lam. 3:32). A good father disciplines his children – not with excessive force, but with loving correction. Christians need a better doctrine of the Lord's discipline because too often we act like God is going to give us prosperity and peace and ease and the perfect life, and if he were to give us that and not give us himself, we would be like a child who just wanted their father's money but not a relationship with him.

The delight of the father is not in his son's behaviour, but in his son! And this is so that we would...

## See the Wisdom of Christ

We all want Joel Osteen to be right. We want our best life now. We want every day to be Friday. But Hebrews 12:3-11 tells us that Jesus himself learned obedience through suffering. Just look at Christ's life: Isaiah 53 says he was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Yet Luke 2 tells us that when he was born the angels announced he had come to bring peace on earth and favour with men (Lk. 2:14) – the shalom of God. He never sinned, and he kept holding on to his Father's word and promise (Heb. 4:15).

Yet Jesus' best Friday wasn't one of prosperity and ease. One Friday, outside of Jerusalem, he was nailed to a cross and executed. We call Good Friday good because he went to a cross, he suffered and died, he was obedient to the point of death so that he could raise us to newness of life with him when he was raised from the dead. He had a peace about going to the cross – a joy set before him, as Hebrews 12:2 says. And Hebrews 12:4-11 tells us that there is a peace that comes from God – a shalom – in the face of enduring trials. You want to give up? You are tired of the struggle? Do you want peace without God, or do you want God himself? The Father disciplines you not because he hates you, but because he loves you so very much! He disciplined his Son who perfectly obeyed. And he disciplines us. If he hated us, he wouldn't discipline us, Heb. 12:7-8 says. Why?

So that we can have HIM. He wants your heart. He wants you. He knows how deeply sin is embedded into the fabric of our lives. He knows that it requires a lifetime of his steadfast love and kindness to bring you to glory. He is patient and slow to anger. He is steadfast in love and kindness to those who cry out to him. And for all who trust in his Son, his anger is gone! He doesn't hate you! He hates how much you struggle with sin. You feel the anxiety? The weariness? The pain? That is the Lord's call – "I love you! You are my delight! I want you – your heart – more than anything else!"

The prospering, good, abundant life is found in the fear of the Lord – we continually repent and come to God and say we need more of him. We continue to wrestle with sin. We fight. We do not give up. Why? Because the Lord has not given up on you. He loves you more than you could ever imagine.