

6. Two invitations to the soul

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[0 : 00] Well friends, let's turn together to Proverbs chapter 9, page 533. You may remember we looked at these earlier chapters of Proverbs a few months ago.

I think it was back in October and November. And I was supposed to be preaching on Proverbs chapter 9 on that very final Sunday of November when the snow came. Do you remember that? And I discovered at about 2 in the afternoon that we weren't going to have an evening service. So I've had to re-microwave and re-cook this sermon and get it ready for tonight. But here we are back in chapter 9. And then God willing, we're going to be looking at some of the chapters right at the very end of the book over the next few Sunday evenings.

Let me just say a little bit about the shape of chapter 9 first. You may have noticed as I read it that it really falls into three distinct sections. Each section is six verses long.

So in the first section, verses 1 to 6, we have a description of Wisdom's house. You might say the residence of Lady Wisdom. And she's preparing a wonderful banquet and she invites us to sit at her table and enjoy it.

[1 : 07] And then you'll see that the final section, verses 13 to 18, is really a mirror image of verses 1 to 6. Here we have the woman Folly, who sits at the door of her house, a bit like a lady of ill repute.

And she too invites passers-by to turn aside and eat from her table. And then sandwiched between those two sections, we have another section of six verses, verses 7 to 12.

And it's an interesting question to ask what bearing that little section has upon the two invitations of Wisdom and Folly. And we'll come to that a bit later this evening.

Well, it would be possible to look at Proverbs chapter 9 and to say, the message of this chapter is really only for those who are not yet Christians.

Here is a chapter tailor-made for those who are standing at the crossroads of life. From one direction, wisdom calls. The voice of God himself, inviting the soul to come to her house and enjoy her feast.

[2 : 15] And to use a word from verse 6, to live. Leave your simple ways and live. Come to life. So wisdom, you might say, invites the doubter who stands at the crossroads to come to life.

But then from the other direction, Folly calls. And she says, come with me, sunshine. It's nicer with me. You'll have a lot of fun if you come to my house. Don't listen to that old bat wisdom.

Her banquet may look lovely. But mine, I can tell you, is more delicious and it's definitely more alluring. You step inside here with me. But to listen to Folly's invitation is death, not life, as the last verse of the chapter makes clear.

Now, we certainly could read the chapter like that. That would be the right way to read it for somebody who is not yet a Christian. And if that is somebody here tonight, not yet a Christian, please do read it that way.

Because to come to the Lord himself is to find life. And to turn away from him is to court death. That's the message, of course, of the whole Bible. There are two ways to live.

[3 : 25] There are two ways. There are two ways. To come to the Lord is life and peace, forgiveness and finally heaven. Whereas to refuse him is to miss the path to joy and peace, to rebel against him.

And the final outcome of choosing that direction is ruin and hell. But this is a chapter for Christians as well. There is nourishment and instruction here for those who have already crossed the threshold into Wisdom's house and are already enjoying her banquet.

Whether young Christians or Christians as ripe as a gorgonzola. A chapter like this helps the Christian to think more broadly and more deeply about what it means to be a Christian.

What it means to belong to the people of God. To get into the details of a chapter like this will deepen our confidence. Our confidence that we did the right thing when we accepted the Lord's invitation to come to him.

Really, as you explore the Bible more and more, it's a little bit like exploring Scotland or even England. Where you have a vast, beautiful, varied territory which is so big you can never take it all in.

[4 : 40] You can never explore it all in your lifetime. And yet, each mile, each square mile over fresh ground extends your understanding of the whole territory and brings great joys as you explore.

So let's treat Proverbs chapter 9 this evening as if it were a lovely corner of Wester Ross perhaps, or Sutherland, that we've never explored before. But we're very keen to get its scenery and its views into our minds.

Now I want to give the chapter the title, Two Invitations to the Soul. If you're a Christian, yes of course you have already accepted Wisdom's invitation.

And you've already turned down Folly's invitation. But this chapter gives us a bigger understanding of what it means to sit at Wisdom's table and also what it would mean to live with folly and to share her bread.

So I'll take the chapter in these three sections. First of all, section 1 to 6, verses 1 to 6. And we'll call this Wisdom Gives Her Generous Invitation.

[5 : 45] Her Generous Invitation. Now there's something very solid and well organised about Lady Wisdom and her domestic arrangements. First let's notice her wonderful house.

Verse 1 tells us that she's built it herself. Wisdom has built her house. I guess that most ladies would shrink from the task of house building. Probably most men would as well.

I certainly would. I could spend ten years trying to put up a garden shed and the first puff of wind would blow it over. My children call me DIY Dad. It's a joke really.

Except it's so sad. But Wisdom is different. She has built her own house. Which is not surprising when you look back into chapter 8. Especially verses 27 to 31.

We saw a few weeks ago that Wisdom there was helping God to build the very planet. The earth. She who builds the earth isn't going to have too much trouble building a house.

[6 : 44] And still in verse 1. She has hewn. Isn't that a lovely verb? It's a verb of power isn't it? The muscle. Reminds me of a Scotsman tossing the caber.

There's a bit of muscle power in hewing isn't there? Well, Wisdom, says Proverbs, has hewn her seven pillars which support her house.

What sort of architecture is suggested by seven pillars? Do you think it's Georgian or Gothic or classical Greek? Well, probably it's the seven of heavenly perfection.

God's perfection. Just as you have the six days of creation. Followed by the seventh day of completion. So the point is there is nothing lacking in Wisdom's house. It is complete and perfect.

And it's very strong. Verse 1 doesn't say much. But it suggests a house of great strength and durability. Which in turn suggests that the Christian life is a life of great strength and durability.

[7 : 43] If you live in a house like that, its character will rub off on you. And what of verse 2? Look with me at verse 2. Verse 2 shows what a generous hostess Wisdom is.

She has slaughtered her beasts. She has mixed her wine. She has also set her table. I guess that if you're a university student, you may be returning home at the end of term in about three weeks time.

And I guess that if your mother is a generous and kind soul, she might prepare a special meal for your return. Is that the sort of thing that happens to university students? If you have kind mothers, I'm sure you do.

And you can imagine your mother preparing this welcome home banquet. She might even have invited great aunt Jane to be with her as well. And your mother and her preparations will remind you of Proverbs chapter 9 verse 2.

She might not be personally slaughtering her bullocks and lambs and porkers. But there will be plenty of meat on the table and bottles of wine. And when the great day comes, she'll set her table with sparkling glasses and the best tablecloth and the cutlery which she has taken from the Welsh dresser.

[8 : 52] Which only comes out on the best occasions. And you will approach that lovely table at the end of term with a developing appetite. Now the point of verse 2 is that wisdom offers the best.

Best for quality and very good for quantity as well. Look at the word beasts with an S. One ox is not enough. There's got to be plenty. And it's joyful this feast.

There's wine there. Not for drunkenness but for celebration. It's a happy table. And think of great aunt Jane, your great aunt who sits there. Good evening great aunt Jane. How lovely to see you.

Have a few more brussel sprouts. They're very good for your digestion. Then look at verse 3.

Wisdom is so keen not to have a single empty place at her festive table.

So she sends out her servant girls in their pretty dresses and white pinafords. And they go out, we read, to the highest places in the town. For the sake of being heard by the largest number of people.

[9 : 52] It's megaphone territory. And they shout out their invitation. There it is in verse 4. Whoever is simple, let him turn in here. Now simple in Proverbs doesn't mean unintelligent.

Unformed. It means unformed. Easily led. Gullible, if you like. Or immature. And we all start off that way, don't we? Not knowing what to believe.

We're unformed in that sense. And so through teenage, and perhaps a little bit later as well, we try out different poses in life. We all try out various poses in our early years.

Because we look in the mirror at the age of 14 or 16 or 18, and we can't quite read what we see there. We don't quite know who we are. So we ask ourselves, am I an artiste?

Am I a muscular sportsman? Am I a computer wizard? Am I a plain man? Am I a brain box? Would a moustache make me look a little bit more grown up?

[10 : 53] And how on earth am I supposed to know what? To believe. It's a big question, isn't it, when you're growing up? But wisdom calls, whoever is simple.

Notice the whoever. Nobody is excluded if they're willing to come. Whoever is simple, let him turn in here if he will. And what does she say next?

Verse 5. Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine that I've mixed. Sit yourself at my table, and you will discover that what I give you is so good, you won't ever want to go anywhere else.

And then verse 6. And let's especially notice this. She says, leave your simple ways. In other words, move. Leave behind that old life of thinking that you can get away with not knowing what to believe.

Settle it in your mind that from now on, you're going to learn from me. And what will the consequence be? Look at verse 6. When you leave your simple ways, you will begin to live.

[11 : 59] You'll say, I never knew what life was all about until I sat at wisdom's table. Or to put this in other terms, I never knew what life was for until I came to Jesus Christ.

So for those of us who are Christians, I guess the great majority here this evening, doesn't this passage fill us with a fresh sense of confidence and joy?

The house that we have entered is a solid house. How well it has been built by the one who was working at God's right hand as he created the heavens and the earth.

This house, with its seven supporting pillars, is not going to fall down in any puff of wind, not even on the day of judgment. And the fine fare that wisdom spreads out before us, we're nourished by it, day after day.

To have an often read Bible in our hands is to be connected with real nourishment for our souls. We've left simplicity behind, that position of being unformed and easily swayed and not knowing what to believe.

[13 : 05] Strong convictions are taking root in our souls. And in the words of verse 6, as we leave our simple ways behind, we are learning to live.

Let me say this also to any here who are not Christians, at least not yet. That is that wisdom still calls to the simple, to those who are confused and don't know what to believe.

Just look back to chapter 8, verse 1. Does not wisdom call? Yes, she still does. And people come to her today, day after day, and they sit at her table and find that as they leave their simple ways behind, they too begin to live.

And this idea of living, being alive, is unpacked in the last line of verse 6 in our chapter. Live, says wisdom, wisdom, and walk in the way of insight.

So wisdom is saying that to sit at her table is to live and to be blessed with insight. Now does that mean, here's a question that may be on some minds, does that mean that those who are not Christians have no insight?

[14 : 19] If you read your newspapers and listen to discussions on the radio and the television, you quickly realise that many people who are not Christians seem to have a great deal of insight into human life and human activity.

You haven't got to be a Christian, for example, to be a good architect or a good doctor or a good engineer. Many people who are not Christians have a very developed understanding of many subjects.

The insight that wisdom speaks about here in verse 6 must therefore mean understanding about God. So for example, imagine two geologists who are studying the rock formations of the British Isles.

And imagine that one of these geologists is a Christian and the other one is not. Now if they are both competent geologists, they'll both be able to understand with equal ability the processes whereby different layers of rock and soil were laid down.

They'll have an equally good grasp of the effects of volcanoes and glaciers and ice ages on the shape and composition of the British Isles. The difference will be that the Christian geologist will see the work and purpose of God in all this, whereas the non-Christian will explain these phenomena simply in terms of the natural forces of climate and weather and periods of global cooling and global warming and so on.

[15 : 45] You could say just the same about the psychiatrist who is a Christian and the psychiatrist who's not. Both will have a great understanding of the human mind and how human beings behave.

But the Christian psychiatrist will know, as the non-Christian will not, that because God has made the human mind and human life, it's only in knowing God and the gospel that the human mind finds its true bearings and its true rest and peace.

So when wisdom tells us here in verse 6 that those who come to her will walk in the way of insight, she's not denying that other people will understand a great deal in terms of this world.

But the insight wisdom speaks about is the knowledge of God. Look at the second half of verse 10 where we have a definition of insight. Verse 10, second half, the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

So the Christian comes to know that God is the creator of all the geology and of all the human minds and human life. And the Christian comes to understand the gospel that God so much loves the lost, rebellious, hell-bound human race that he has provided a saviour and that if we will turn to the saviour in trust and repentance, we shall be forgiven and we shall become truly members of God's people.

[17 : 12] That's the insight we receive as we accept wisdom's invitation and turn aside into her house and feast at her table. So there's the first thing.

Wisdom gives a generous invitation to the simple. And the more we go on in the Christian life, the more glad we become that we live in this mighty house which is buttressed by the seven pillars of wisdom.

Well let's turn now to the other house, the one that is mentioned in verse 14. We're not told anything about its architecture but we do know from verse 18 who its guests prove to be.

So if wisdom has issued a generous invitation, folly, and here's my second point, folly gives us a deceptive invitation.

And we're looking here at the final six verses, verses 13 to 18. We'll come back to 7 to 12 in just a moment. But let's look at folly and her invitation first. Now you may have seen there's a striking similarity between folly and wisdom at one level.

[18 : 24] And that is in the words of invitation that folly uses. Look at verse 16. Whoever is simple, let him turn in here. And then look back at verse 4 and you see that wisdom uses exactly the same words.

Whoever is simple, let him turn in here. So what point is the author making here? Surely this, that when a person is simple, in other words easily led and gullible and probably young, it's very hard to tell the difference between the voice of wisdom and the voice of folly.

Both seem to be equally appealing. So wisdom says in verse 5, come eat of my bread and drink of my wine. And Mr. Simple or Miss Simple says, hmm, that sounds rather nice, rather attractive.

But as soon as wisdom has spoken, then folly speaks. And she too seems to be offering a meal.

Look at verse 17. Not bread and meat and wine, but bread and water and yet, in verse 17, she adds two adjectives that wisdom never mentioned.

And those are the words sweet and pleasant. What she offers may not be wine, but it's sweet water. Sweet because it's been stolen.

[19 : 48] Things that are forbidden, things which have involved a little bit of law-breaking, can have a delicious and attractive aspect to them. as something rather alluring about crossing the line between legality and criminality.

I don't ever remember shoplifting when I was a youngster, but I can easily imagine that a Mars bar eaten in secret and not paid for, in other words, nicked, would have an excitement about it which a regulation fully paid for Mars bar would not have.

Isn't that right? Just look carefully at verse 17 at these enticing words of folly. Now there's nothing wrong with sweet water, is there? In fact, a cup of water drawn from a highland burn is sweet and very delicious.

It's the word stolen that gives folly's game away. And there's nothing wrong with bread. Bread is terrific. It's the basic food. It's the staff of life. But it's bread here eaten in secret.

That has the whiff of wrongdoing about it. nothing needs to be done in secret except for shameful things. Things that would make us blush if we knew that other people knew about them.

[21 : 04] So in verse 17, folly is clearly inviting the simple gullible person to do wrong things. To be a partner in theft in some way or in shameful secrecy.

The problem is that this invitation in verse 17 is really so attractive. There's an edge of danger to it but it is alluring. And the simple or easily led or young person will often accept folly's invitation because that person's ability to distinguish right from wrong has not grown mature.

The more grown up person, the person who knows the Lord, quickly sees through it, quickly sees the danger and quickly sends folly packing. But the young person, the person to whom the book of Proverbs is really addressed, that's the person who is in the greatest danger of falling into the clutches of this woman folly.

Now let me just raise one question which may be on some people's minds as you look at verses 13 to 18. You may be wondering if this final section of the chapter is really all about sexual sin.

Because at first glance it looks just a little bit like that. There is folly presented to us as if she were a prostitute sitting at her door and beckoning with her finger to any foolish young man who happens to be passing.

[22 : 26] And you may notice that this passage is very similar to the passages in chapters 5, 6 and 7. We looked at one of them a few months ago which are all about sexual immorality.

But I think that this woman folly here in chapter 9 actually represents the whole range of human folly and temptation and sin. And I say that because back in chapter 5 which we looked at a few months ago sexual waywardness and adultery are being contrasted with fidelity in marriage.

So in chapter 5 we have the faithful marriage contrasted with the adulterous relationship. But here in chapter 9 we're not dealing with just that limited area of sexual behaviour.

We have here folly all of folly contrasted with wisdom. wisdom. And wisdom as chapter 8 makes clear she deals with the whole range of godly behaviour with truthfulness and justice in government and lots of other things besides.

So this woman folly in chapter 9 verse 13 she represents the allurements of every kind of sin. That will include sexual sin of course but the point is that all temptation beckons us with its inviting finger.

[23 : 40] So next time friends you're tempted to steal a Mars bar or possibly to defraud the inland revenue of a few thousand pounds it's still the woman folly who is trying to convince you that stolen water is sweet.

So how is how is the simple person and that could be any of us how is the simple person going to become armed and able to resist in our struggling with the temptation to do wrong things how are we going to make progress and grow from gullible immaturity to a more robust godliness?

I think the answer is by coming to understand verse 18 in this passage let me read that verse again but he does not know that the dead are there that her guests are in the depths of shale now the he at the beginning of verse 18 he's the simple young man he's likely to fall into folly's temptations because there is something he does not know that's what the verse is saying what is it that he doesn't know well he doesn't know it but the author of proverbs is telling us so that we should know it you see if that young man knew verse 18 he'd be picking up his heels and running sprinting from folly's door but he doesn't know it so what does he need to learn here in verse 18 and what do we also need to learn verse 18 will teach him that if he becomes a guest in folly's house it will choke the

very life out of him her guests are the dead shale in the old testament doesn't mean exactly what Jesus means by hell but it really comes to much the same thing it means a state of death and disintegration from which there is no return now if we will accept and learn verse 18 it will keep us from listening to folly's invitations so let me just ask a question to each individual who's here this evening is it possible is it beckoning you in some way to drink her stolen water or to eat bread with her in secret is she saying this thing that

I'm suggesting to you is sweet it's pleasant you'll have such fun if you come with me and are you thinking I'll do it the consequences can't be that bad well friend think again look at verse 18 this is God lovingly speaking to the tempted person those who sit at table with folly those who turn into her house and become her guests are taking the fast route to shale to death look back at verse 6 and listen again to the voice of wisdom leave your simple ways she says and live to go to wisdom's house is life but to go to folly is death this is a life and death issue it's a heaven and hell issue in the end Proverbs chapter 9 is summoning us to choose life and to flee from the jaws of death one reason why we may not want to take the warning of this chapter very seriously is that we may think of folly as a figure of fun a kind of stage buffoon who is that she can't really be taken seriously but verse 18 opens our eyes to what's really going on here all the way through the

Bible right from Moses through to Jesus and the apostles the great message of the Bible is choose life the whole human race is under God's curse and condemnation we deserve death but God has intervened and he's provided a way of escape for those who will take it and he's given us a Bible to teach us just what that way of escape is wisdom therefore presses her invitation on us in verse 6 leave your simple ways and live and God warns us in verse 18 of the consequences of dining with folly and why does God warn us because he cares so much about our destiny if you're undecided about which house to turn into look at verse 18 just look at that verse learn it by heart write it out pin it up on your kitchen wall stick it on your computer make it your home page get it into your system believe it it's a warning that none of us can afford to ignore the guests of folly are not merely fools they're the dead well let me press this message home by looking briefly at verses 7 to 12 now as we come to a close because verses 7 to 12 show us that there are really two ways to react to a strong message such as we have here in chapter 9 in these descriptions of wisdom and folly in verses 7 to 12 there are two people two types of person described there's the scoffer and there's the wise person now the question of course is which are we when we read of the two invitations of wisdom and folly how are we going to react to them are we going to scoff at them that's one possibility or are we going to accept them let me read verses 7 to 9 again and as

[29 : 21] I read them ask yourself which end of the stick you're getting hold of so here we go verse 7 whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse he will hate you reprove a wise man and he will love you give instruction to a wise man and he will be still wiser teach a righteous man and he will increase in learning now who are those verses intended for you think that they were intended to guide people who go around reproofing and instructing and teaching others it might almost be a short excerpt from the department of education latest manual on how to be a good teacher well that would be the wrong end of the stick because really these verses are not about how to give reproof and how to give instruction they're about how to receive reproof and instruction these sections of

Proverbs chapter 9 about wisdom and folly contain both instruction and reproof and warning so how do we respond to them in the terms of verse 18 if we reject these things we're scoffers and friends I must press this home because so much hangs on it if you're sitting there thinking I do not wish to dine with lady wisdom or hear her teaching and secondly I do want to have lunch with folly regularly and thirdly I wish this sermon would end right now if that's what you're thinking it may well be that you're scoffing but if on the other hand and I'm picking up halfway through verse 8 here if you're loving the reproof and teaching of Proverbs chapter 9 then according to verse 9 you're becoming wiser and you're increasing in learning and verse 10 is true of you as well your wisdom is growing because you fear the

Lord you're trembling at the implications of this passage you realize that real insight is to know the Holy One and you rejoice as verse 11 puts it that by wisdom your days and years will be multiplied and blessed right the way into eternity and then we have verse 12 which has been described as perhaps the strongest expression of individualism in the whole Bible let me read verse 12 if you are wise you're wise for yourself if you scoff you alone will bear it in other words each individual must make his or her own choice and bear the consequences if you choose the course of wisdom it's you as an individual who will be blessed if you listen to lady wisdom if your heart rises up to her and you

say to her I'm coming to your house today because I want to know God then you'll be making the right response to

Proverbs chapter 9 you'll be accepting this chapter and the whole Bible along with it but if you scoff if you say I'm not having this I'm not going to submit to the wisdom of God I'm going to be the captain of my own soul then as verse 12 says you alone will bear the consequence of your scoffing you'll be on your own no Lord Jesus no saviour no comfort just yourself on your own at the end well if you're a Christian aren't you glad to be one look again at these words of wisdom in verses 5 and 6 come eat of my bread and drink of the wine I've mixed leave your simple ways and live and walk in the way of insight that is real life that's the only place to be in wisdom strong house buttressed by her seven pillars eating her delightful banquet knowing wisdom and thus knowing the Lord himself well let's bow our heads and we'll pray we thank you our gracious God that the assurance of these words is that as we leave the simple ways of doubt and immaturity and gullibility we shall live and walk in the way of insight and enjoy the bread and wine that Lady Wisdom has prepared we pray dear father that you'll help each one of us in this building here tonight to walk in the ways of wisdom and to love you to listen to your voice and please give us a growing inner moral strength and courage dear father to say no again and again to the voice of folly as she beckons to us we pray that you'll remind us that those who dine with her are in the depths of shale and all this we ask in

[34 : 49] Jesus Christ's name Amen