

The Urgent Call of Wisdom

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at page 527, and we'll have a moment of prayer. Lord God, as we turn from the praising of your name to the preaching of your word, we ask that indeed we will listen to the voice of wisdom, and we'll listen to the voice which is your voice, that voice made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

And Proverbs 1, which I'm going to call this sermon, Wisdom Calls Urgently. That's the title we are going to use for this morning.

Many, many people try to describe in a sentence what the Bible is. There are many different ways of doing that. Some are better than others.

But the one which I find least helpful, the one which I find least stimulating, is the statement that the Bible is a rule book, or a guide book.

Now, there are rules in the Bible. The Bible does guide us. Now, think of it this way. You could, for example, know the highway code back to front and be an appalling driver.

[1 : 34] You could, for example, have a wonderful shelf of cookery books in your kitchen, and yet not able to produce anything that people want to eat. It's not enough, in other words, having rules.

It's not enough having guides. We need the power to carry these into practice. The reason I say this is because when you read the book of Proverbs, it's very easy to imagine that that's what it is, a book of rules, saying you've got to do this, and if you do this, God will accept you.

Now, I want to say straight away, the book of Proverbs is the same gospel as the rest of the Bible. The book of Proverbs is not a different gospel, saying, if you live in this way, then God will accept you.

The book of Proverbs is saying, exactly the same as the rest of the Bible, that when God calls you, when the voice of wisdom calls you, this is the way to live, and this is the power with which to live it. Proverbs is part of what's often called the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, which draws very heavily from the early chapters of Genesis. It deals with things such as creation, evil, the human behavior, and human relationships.

[2 : 47] It doesn't focus particularly on the history of Israel, or on its sacrificial system, and so on. But it's not contradictory to these.

Rather, it's saying, when you take all the great revelation of God, the Creator, the Redeemer, and translate that into daily living, this is what must happen.

It's a book about daily living, a book about relationships, a book about the problems of existence, a book about work, a book about leisure, all these kind of things.

But above all, it is a book about the fear of the Lord. Verse 7, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Then later on, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Last week, I discovered in the Cornhill Library a musty old book, which didn't look very promising, didn't look as if there would be anything very much in it, an old commentary on Proverbs, in fact, written in 1856.

[3 : 48] Then I thought, it might be worth looking at this, and I found gem after gem in it. This is what the author, a man called Bridges, says about the fear of the Lord.

He says, It is not feeling, imagination, impulse, or sentiment, but it is the sound and healthful energy of godliness.

That's a wonderful phrase. The sound and healthful energy of godliness flowing from the vital principles of gospel truth. So, in other words, the fear of the Lord is something that changes us.

It's something that has healthful energy and godliness. And what we're going to do this morning and this evening is look, if you like, at the bookends of the first section of Proverbs, which is chapters 1 to 9.

In chapter 1, we have the subject of wisdom introduced. Then we have a kind of summing up of that in chapter 9 before we go on to the rest of the book.

[4 : 52] And when you look at the book of Proverbs, the book of Proverbs probably gives itself the clearest and fullest introduction of any biblical book. When you're reading a Bible book, it's always very important to discover what its main theme is.

Sometimes it's straightforward. John tells us he wrote his gospel that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. But sometimes it's difficult to work out.

In Proverbs, in verses 1 to 7, we have a very full and detailed introduction of what this book is about. And what I'm going to do is to take these verses as the key to the whole chapter, the key to open the book, to listen to the call of wisdom.

Wisdom cries aloud in the street. Wisdom calls urgently. I'm going to say three things. First of all, I'm going to say that wisdom is about both thinking and behaving.

It affects both our minds and our behavior. Secondly, that wisdom is for everyone. Whatever age we may be, whatever stage of life we may be, this is a chapter for us.

[6 : 06] And thirdly, I'm going to talk about wisdom flowing from our relationship with God. In other words, it's not something we do in order to gain God's favor. It's something that flows from God's gift of himself to us.

So first of all, wisdom is about thinking and behaving. As Solomon begins this book, most of the book comes from him, although we read about other authors later on in the book.

And we read that a later king, Hezekiah, had them collected. But as Solomon begins, he is echoing the voice of Moses. Like everything else in the Bible, in the Old Testament, sorry, this echoes the voice of Moses.

Choose life, says Moses. I set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. That's what Solomon is doing. So the way of wisdom is the way of life.

And the other way is the way of foolishness or death. This is not good advice. It is life-giving truth. So first of all, it is intelligent and thoughtful living.

[7 : 14] Verse 2, to know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight. Paul tells us in Romans 12 that we are transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Our minds are important. The sins we commit tend to be sins we've thought about. The good things that we do tend to be things that have already germinated in our minds.

Our thinking matters. Our minds matter. Love the Lord your God with all your mind. To know wisdom. Know in the biblical sense doesn't just mean know about, but it means know in such a way that we are committed to it.

When John said, the verse I've just quoted, to know the Lord, to know Jesus Christ, that means not just to know about him. It means to have a relationship with him. And to notice, to receive instruction, to know wisdom and instruction.

It's not just a search in the dark, but a willingness to listen to God. We will not find God simply by searching for him. If we want to find God, we have to listen to his words.

[8 : 24] And that's why many people don't find God. That's why many intelligent people don't find God, because they don't listen to his words. And this is developed in verse 6, to understand the proverb and the saying.

The words of the wise and their riddles. Sayings which stretch the mind. Those little observations scattered throughout the book of Proverbs that give us wisdom for everyday living.

Wonderful little word pictures as the book develops. Pictures which penetrate right to the heart of our way of life. So wisdom is first of all intelligent and thoughtful living.

Paying attention to what God says. But it's also disciplined living. Verse 3, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity.

And that's particularly developed in verses 10 and following. My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent. Now we're all sinners.

[9 : 27] But sinners here particularly means those who habitually and blatantly indulge in sin. Who enjoy it. And who want others to join them.

That's what Solomon is warning about. Try to corrupt others. Now where does that end? It ends in Sheol, verse 12, the biblical word for the world of death.

It ends in death. The Old Testament, by the way, does know of life after death. I'll say more about this this evening. This is not just death in this world. This is what the New Testament calls the

second death.

So that's the first thing then. Wisdom is about both thinking and behaving. If we think clearly and in a godly manner, we will act in a godly manner.

If we think in a foolish and sloppy and undisciplined way, we will act in that way as well. This book is an enormously practical book, but it shows that behavior flows from belief.

[10:27] Secondly, this book is for everyone. Who is the book for? Well, look at verse 8, first of all. Hear my son. Also, of course, daughter.

This is for people on the threshold of life. That's the first person this book is addressed to. People on the threshold of life. People starting a new job.

People starting a new school. People going to university and so on. People whose life is opening up before them. Solomon is saying, if you want that life to be fulfilled, if you want it to be happy, if you want it to be successful, this is the way to live.

And notice how Solomon Solomon does this. Verse 8, Hear my son, your father's instruction.

Forsake not your mother's teaching. Remember in ancient Israel, the home was a very, very important place for instruction.

And once again, behind this are the words of Moses and Deuteronomy. Talk about this to your children. Talk about it as you're rising and talk about it as you go about your business.

[11:36] In other words, let your lives be dominated by wisdom. Bring your children up in this atmosphere. Bring them up with this understanding. Bring them up to listen to the voice of wisdom, which is the voice of God.

And notice Solomon further says, they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck. Wisdom is beautiful. Wisdom is not just the right way to live.

Wisdom is the attractive way to live. That's what Solomon is saying here. He's not giving platitudes like Polonius in Hamlet, not neither a borrower nor a lender be and all this sort of stuff.

One of the great problems of preaching today where people do often preach platitudes because they don't listen to the voice of wisdom. They ignore the words of the scriptures.

Now if a preacher ignores the words of the scripture, the preacher is cast back on his own resources and has to see and has to draw from his own wisdom rather than drawing from God's wisdom.

[12:38] It's not like that at all. Wisdom is listening to the voice that speaks life. Once again, the ways that Moses displays, the way of life and the way of death and the way of life and death that Jesus himself presents in the Sermon on the Mount.

Choices made in our early years shape our lives. Read the book of Daniel. Read how Daniel makes that early choice probably in his teens at the time to make a stand for God, to make a stand for wisdom and read what happens.

It's not easy. It's tough. It's difficult. But it shapes his whole life. Well, if wisdom's just for young people then that means the rest of us can switch off and forget about it.

No, says Solomon, wisdom is for the mature as well. Verse 5, let the wise hear and increase in learning and the one who understands obtain guidance.

There is never a time when wisdom is not needed. In another way, there is never a time when we know the Bible so well and we don't need to read it anymore or listen to preaching about it anymore.

[13:50] Wisdom is something that is needed at every stage in our life. And this is particularly developed in verses 20 to 23. Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets.

Notice what it says. It doesn't say wisdom cries aloud in the church and makes your voice heard from the pulpit although one hopes that does happen. It's saying that wherever you may be wisdom is calling.

These places, the street, where people live, the markets, the busy places, the shopping centres, the commerce of daily living, the public squares, the entrance of the city gates, all the places where people live, where people meet, where business happens, where instruction happens, where education happens.

Nowadays, nowadays, of course, much, a lot of that is also available on the internet and so on. Everywhere, the voice of wisdom calls.

And who does wisdom call to? She calls to the simple. Verse 22, How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? And who are the simple?

[15:02] The simple are the naive and the gullible. Chapter 14, verse 15, wonderful little phrase, the simple believe everything. The kind of person who believes every voice, all the contradictory voices.

Wisdom is calling and saying, look, you can't possibly believe everything that everybody says because so much of it is contradictory. Listen to the voice of God, the clear, unmistakable voice of God, cutting through all the nonsense that's talked so often.

So wisdom calls to the simple. You don't have to be, in other words, you don't have to be, you don't have to be educated to listen to wisdom. All you need to do is to be open. But the wisdom also calls to fools.

Now the fool is not necessarily the stupid person. The fool is the person who does not listen to the voice of wisdom and teaches others not to listen to it.

Richard Dawkins, professor at Oxford University, is a fool in the biblical sense. Highly intelligent man, brilliant man, that he does not listen to the voice of wisdom.

[16:19] That is what the Bible means by a fool. The fool, says Psalm 14, says in his heart there is no God. That is the biblical fool. So, wisdom calls to the simple.

Turn away from your naive gullibility. Wisdom calls to the fool, saying, how bright you are, if you are not living in the real world, if you're not listening to the voice of wisdom.

The fool is someone who writes God out of the story. He also, we also, the voice of wisdom is also calling to the scoffers or the mockers.

Verse, um, verse, um, 22. Probably, the scoffer or the mocker is the cynic, the sophisticated sneerer, the person who has seen it all before.

That is the mocker in terms of biblical wisdom. If the simple believe everything they hear, the scoffer is at the opposite end of the extreme and believes nothing.

[17:21] If the simple are taken in by everything, taken in by all the spin, the scoffer rejects everything, even the sincere, even the wise.

So, you see how comprehensive this is. And, eventually, these, such people hate knowledge. Verse 22. Not because, not because knowledge is something that's beyond their understanding, but because they don't want to know it.

This so often happens, doesn't it? People are interested, I've seen it happening many times, I'm sure many of you have as well. People are interested in the gospel. They're interested in Christ. They listen to the voice of wisdom. Until it comes to a point when they realize that if they're going to follow that voice, there are things in their life that have to be put right.

And that's when they stop. That's when they turn back. Because wisdom is going to transform. Wisdom is going to change. We'll see that more fully this evening.

[18:23] So, wisdom, the voice of wisdom is not just for young people, it's for the middle aged, it's for the old, it's for whatever stage we're at. It's calling us to reject the voice of folly and listen to the voice of wisdom.

And thirdly, wisdom flows from a relationship with God. Verse 7, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. It begins with God himself.

Now, beginning doesn't mean something that you learn, an elementary thing and then leave it behind. Beginning is something that controls the whole of our lives.

Let me try and illustrate it this way. A child learning to count is not in the same position as some brilliant mathematician. On the other hand, that mathematician is only a brilliant mathematician because when he learned to count as a child, these roles remain valid.

He began there learning to count, but they're still valid now at the very sophisticated stage he's reached. A great author writing a novel or a play or a poem is not in the same position as a child learning the alphabet, but it's only because this writer learned the alphabet and learned the basic way language works that he's able to write it.

[19:46] Perhaps even more striking, a world roller whose word determines the fate of thousands and perhaps millions is not in the same position as a child learning it's wrong to tell lies, but only if that person remembers what he learned as a child that it was wrong to tell lies, will he make decisions that are good and that are godly.

You see, that's what the beginning of wisdom is, not something we leave behind. The gospel is not something elementary that we learn when we come to Christ first and then leave it behind.

The whole of our life is shaped by wisdom. So what is the fear of the Lord? The fear of the Lord is first of all a sense of awe, the sense of the mystery of God.

What the great prophet Isaiah says, to whom will you compare God? In his great poem in chapter 40 of the mysteries of the universe. The kind of thing you sense when you look up at the night sky. You listen to the crash of the waves by the shore. You walk among moorland and mountain and you have this sense of something beyond. Now the contemporary world rather likes this sense of the fear of God.

[21 : 06] Because it's so easy to collapse this into a kind of vague mysticism. So easy then to turn this into a kind of nature worship. Worship of the creation rather than the creator.

And when you go to visit borders and waterstones, the mind, body and spirit section will give you abundant books that will show you this kind of, this sort of thing.

People have turning away from God to the worship of his creation. That's why there's another important sense of the fear of the Lord. To fear the Lord is to obey the Lord.

That's surely what lies at the very heart of this chapter. The fear of the Lord is not just sense of a feeling of the other and of something beyond ourselves. The fear of the Lord means listening to the words of the Lord and obeying them.

A fundamental change of priorities. If we don't listen, this will lead to judgment. Verse 29, they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord.

[22 : 10] That doesn't mean they didn't look up at the night sky and think, wow, that's wonderful. It means, verse 30, would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof.

It's awfully easy to have this sense of the otherness of God and live in a totally godless way. That's why obedience is so important.

That's a part of fearing the Lord. To fear the Lord is to obey the Lord. But there's another element there, surely, as well.

It's not just a sense of all and an obedience of God's word. There's what I would call an affectionate reverence. Verse 24, wisdom says, I stretched out my hand.

Now, this is not just wisdom stretching out her hand in a gesticulation as she speaks. This is the hand of friendship, the hand of welcome, the hand of invitation.

[23 : 09] Wisdom is never just an intellectual exercise. Wisdom is the whole of our personality. everything about us is to be, is part of wisdom's call and needs a response.

That's why there's all this emphasis on the danger of being foolish, the danger of being simple, the danger of simply gullibly setting aside it, the danger of mocking it, the danger of rejecting it, the danger of thinking we know better.

verse 31, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way and have the fill of their own devices. The terrifying thing, that when people keep on rejecting God, there comes a point when God says, right, you have it your way.

Wisdom says, you ignored me, I'm going to ignore you, that's the way you want it. And if you read the passage in Romans 1, beginning verse 18, you have the terrible divine hands off.

God gave them over. To a corrupt mind. They lived corruptly, they thought corruptly, and God underwrote that. God endorsed it. So as we listen to the voice of wisdom, who is to listen?

[24 : 25] There is absolutely nobody in this building, nobody in the streets outside, who is not called by wisdom. Whatever age we may be, social status, educational attainments, all these alike are irrelevant.

The important thing is, do we listen to the voice of wisdom? And the other question which I want to end with is, when do we listen to the voice of wisdom?

Is it something we can put off? Is it something we can wait till we're older? Wait till the children have grown up? Wait till they've paid off the mortgage? Wait till I'm finished university? Wait till I'm settled down in my new job?

Or my new home? The time to hear, when is the time to listen to the voice of wisdom? time is now, surely. That is the time to listen to the voice of wisdom.

There's an old story told about, it's only a story, but it makes the point powerfully, how the devil wished to tempt people more successfully. And he gathered his demons together, and various people, one of them said, look, I know what to do, I'll go into the world, and I'll encourage people to fill the churches with false teaching.

[25 : 37] The devil said, well, that won't work, we've tried it before, and all that happens is the enemy raises up true teachers. Another one said, I know what to do, I'll send, I'll go and I'll stir up persecution.

The devil said, that won't work either, we've tried that often, God's people simply emerge stronger. And one of them said, I'll go into the world, I'll tell them that you love them, I'll tell them you sent Jesus to die for them, I'll tell them he's going to judge them, and I'll tell them they must be ready for it.

And of course the others laughed, the devil says, wait a minute, what do you mean? He said, I'll tell them they don't have to do anything about it at the moment. And the devil instantly agreed, that will work, he said.

Only a story, but it does make a powerful point. Today, says the psalmist, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your heart.

Let's pray. Lord God, we confess that many, many other voices, both inside us and outside us, clamor for attention.

[26 : 52] Many other ways appeal to us that are not the ways of wisdom. So guide us, Lord. So may your spirit work in our hearts, that the voice we listen to will be the voice that calls to life, the voice that enriches, the voice that will eventually bring us home.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.