

Gospel Prosperity in 2023

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- [0 : 00] We're going to turn now to God's Word, and we are in the book of Proverbs. We'll be looking at Proverbs over the coming Sundays, and this morning we are on Proverbs 3.
- And we're focusing in here on the first 12 verses. We have plenty of Bibles around the place, dotted around at the back, and do grab a Bible if you don't have one.
- We have plenty available. So Proverbs chapter 3, and I'll read from verse 1. My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments.
- For length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you. Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you.
- Bind them around your neck. Write them on the tablets of your heart, so you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man.
- [1 : 12] Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths.
- Be not wise in your own eyes. Fear the Lord and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.
- Honor the Lord with your wealth, and with the firstfruits of all your produce. Then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.
- My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline, or be weary of His reproof. For the Lord reproves Him whom He loves, as a father, the son in whom He delights.
- Amen. May God bless His word to us this morning. May God bless His word to us this morning.
- [2 : 44] And we'll think about this together. Now, I don't know about you, but I'm not particularly one for New Year's resolutions. Perhaps you are. But how about this for a set of goals for the year?
- This is the set of resolutions according to Proverbs chapter 3. Look with me at these words. So, chapter 3, verse 2. Length of days and years of life and peace.
- Or verse 4. You'll find favor and good success with God and man. Verse 6. He will make straight your paths.
- Verse 8. Healing to your flesh. Verse 10. Wealth. Your barns will be overflowing. Verse 12. The love of the Father.
- That's a pretty good list. Long life and peace. Good reputation. Straightforwardness. Health and vitality. Wealth. The love of the Father.
- [3 : 51] Proverbs 3 holds out the promises of abundance and life. Is it too good to be true? Are these verses too good to be true?
- Is this really the sort of passage we ought to be reading at the start of 2023? Are we not in the middle of a winter of discontent? Is this just not crass prosperity gospel?
- Well, an answer, briefly. No. This is not too good to be true. This is absolutely the right passage to take at the start of a new year.

Even though we're living through dark days. It is not crass prosperity gospel. You see, the gospel is all about prosperity.

But it's prosperity on God's terms and on his timescales. It is the good life as defined by him for now and for all eternity.

[4 : 55] It is life with a resurrection firmly in view. See, life in Proverbs is not just concerned with life here and now. It certainly has a lot to say about how to live life now.

But the horizon in Proverbs stretches out beyond death into eternity. Listen to Proverbs 12. It says, In the path of righteousness is life.

And in its pathway is no death. See, Proverbs has eternity in view all the time. One writer says that life in the majority of Proverbs refers to abundant life in fellowship with God.

A living relationship that is never envisaged as ending in clinical death. But rather, it is a blessed future that outlasts death. In other words, immortality.

That is the horizon in Proverbs, the whole Bible. Eternity. But it's not only about life in eternity. Proverbs deals with life now.

[6 : 09] That is why it's such an interesting book, at the very least. It deals with the complexities of life now. The blessings of being one of the Lord's children are not delayed until eternity only.

We do get to enjoy blessings now. Imperfectly, yes. There are real benefits to living according to the maker's instructions in his world.

You see, our God is abundantly generous. And he loves to give good gifts to his children. The gospel is a gospel of prosperity and abundance and life.

From the very beginning and all the way through the Bible, we see that. The gospel message we see in the New Testament is the culmination, the fulfillment of the gospel message proclaimed through the whole Bible.

And the message of Proverbs 3 is the same message proclaimed by Moses, by Jesus, by the apostles. And here's the message in a nutshell of these verses.

[7 : 18] Humble yourselves with obedient faith and enjoy the blessings of God's abundant grace. Humble yourselves with obedient faith and enjoy the blessings of God's abundant grace.

See, God promises abundant blessings, wonderful blessings. But they come only as we submit ourselves to him, as we humbly follow him and obey his words.

In other words, these blessings come to us by faith. Faith is the means by which we receive these abundant gifts. It's not the grounds for receiving them.

Faith is the means. We don't earn it. They're a gift. But faith is the way in which we receive them. God's grace and goodness is utterly unmerited by us.

It's all grace. But to enjoy his good gifts, as we see here in Proverbs 3, we must receive his gifts through turning to him and submitting ourselves to him.

[8 : 23] We cannot expect to live the good life in God's world by rejecting him and doing it our own way. No, we're to live God's way. We can only receive his gifts through turning to him and submitting ourselves to him.

It is hearing his word and doing it. That's the message of Moses. Deuteronomy 4. Let me read you a couple of verses from here.

This is Moses speaking to the people on the edge of the promised land. He says, He's saying, Hear these words and do them.

That will be your wisdom. And that's the message of Proverbs 3. It's the message all the way through the Bible. So two simple points this morning. First, God's abundant gifts of life. Let's see what he's holding out for us here.

God's abundant gifts of life. Let's look again over those verses. He speaks of life. End of verse 2. Length of days and years of life and peace I want to add to you.

[9 : 56] In verse 4, You'll find favor and good success in the sight of men. Straight paths he will make for you. Verse 6. Healing to your flesh, refreshing to your bones.

Verse 8. Your barns will be filled with plenty. Your vats will be bursting with wine. These are wonderful and beautiful gifts, aren't they?

Life, health, abundance, wealth. Fullness of life is what is set out here. Longevity of life.

Reputation with God and man. Health and wealth. Life, life, life, life. Life, life, life, life. Life, life, life, life. From the very beginning. It is abundant, lavish, plentiful, generous life in fellowship with him.

And so it ought not to surprise us that blessings are to be found by living in accordance with God's wisdom because he has designed the world to work in certain ways.

[10 : 56] And if we go with the grain of how he has made things, we should expect life to generally go well. This is God's world. And his ways work best.

God's ways are the best ways as well as being the right ways. So to refuse God's ways, it's not just choosing a less good option.

It's choosing a way that's ultimately dangerous and leads only to disaster, eternal disaster. To reject God's ways is to reject the way of ultimate blessing, is to reject the way of the creator.

And so the message of Proverbs is the same message of the whole Bible. It's the essence of the gospel, isn't it? God's unmerited grace, his blessings of abundant life, can only be received by those who obey his command to serve him and to serve him only.

It's the message most proclaimed in Deuteronomy. Listen to these words from Deuteronomy 28. And notice all the abundant blessings he sets out to God's people.

[12 : 06] Moses says, If you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all nations of the earth.

And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field.

Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, and the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your cattle. The increase of your herds, and the young of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket, and your kneading bowl.

Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you. They shall come out against you one way, and flee before you seven ways.

The Lord will command the blessing on you in your barns, and in all that you undertake. And he will bless you in the land that the Lord your God has given you. The Lord will establish you as a people holy to himself, as he's sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and walk in all his ways.

[13 : 18] See, Moses is laying out there the abundant, lavish blessings of belonging to God's people, which we can only receive through humble, obedient faith.

It's God's mercy, isn't it? It's all his initiative, all his grace. It's the same message the apostles proclaimed. Listen to this from the apostle Peter in Acts chapter 2.

Peter, addressing a huge crowd, says, Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

For the promise is for you, and for your children, and for all who are far off. Everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself. See, Peter is laying out there abundant, lavish blessings of belonging to God's people, which we can only receive through humble, obedient faith.

Again, it's God's mercy and his grace. It's all his initiative, isn't it? He promises forgiveness of sins. He promises himself. He promises the gift of the Holy Spirit.

[14 : 34] You see, our God loves to give good gifts to his children. He wants life. Life in all its fullness for you.

But, we must remember that this is not crass prosperity gospel on our terms, right here, right now. Now, this is blessing on God's terms, and on his timescales.

You see, one day, the Bible tells us Christ will return. And he will return as judge. And he will usher in the new creation. When we will know in all its fullness the blessings that are promised in Proverbs, in Deuteronomy, and in Acts.

We will one day see them in all their fullness. That is the destiny for all Christians. Revelation 21. Here's the vision John saw.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

[15 : 47] And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people.

And God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore.

For the former things have passed away. That is the destiny for all who belong to Christ. These promises we've read of will come to pass in the end.

But it's on God's terms and on his timescales. But it's not only blessings then. There are real blessings now to being one of the Lord's children.

It's not that we don't endure hardships and difficulties. Of course we do. Proverbs is very realistic about that. Just read through the book of Proverbs. You'll see that it deals with real life in this fallen world.

[16 : 58] We need to read these verses in Proverbs 3 alongside the rest of the book. Which speaks very plainly of life in this fallen world as one of God's people.

But whilst acknowledging that, we don't jettison the reality that living according to the maker's instructions in this temporal life will generally lead to blessings and not curses.

Bruce Waltke addresses this question. And challenges the popular evangelical solution. Which says that these are not promises, but rather probabilities.

He's critiquing that idea. He says, Although this solution contains an element of truth, it raises theological, practical, and psychological problems by stating the matter badly.

According to this wording, he writes, The human partner, i.e. you and me, are expected to keep his obligations perfectly. But, God may keep his obligations imperfectly.

[18 : 06] And that is, of course, absurd. The truth is that though we are faithless, he will remain faithful. He will always keep his promises.

That is our only hope, is it not? And so we need to see these promises in Proverbs 3 as being actual promises. We will certainly experience the fulfillment of them in the new creation.

As we've seen, life in Proverbs has eternity in view. And we will enjoy imperfectly foretastes of them in this life. And we see that, don't we?

The promises held out in Proverbs are generally true observations. The sober, not the drunkard. The cool tempers, not the hothead. The diligent, not the lazy.

Tend to enjoy health and wealth, don't they? These are real promises of life, prosperity, health.

[19 : 06] But they're promises on God's terms and on his timescales. It is life in relationship with him, the creator, forever.

That is the essence of the blessings he offers. God is offering himself. Not just things. This isn't about a nicer house or better job.

It's not about the gifts, really, is it? It's about the giver himself. God offers us himself. And we enjoy the reality of that relationship now.

In the midst of this fallen and broken world, we can enjoy that now. And we will enjoy it fully in the world to come. These are real promises.

As Proverbs 4 puts it far more eloquently. The path of the righteous, in other words, a normal Christian, the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.

[20 : 17] We don't yet experience the full blazing sunshine of all these blessings. Some will preach a message like that.

And of course, it's attractive, but it's a lie. We don't yet experience the fullness of these blessings now. But we do enjoy something of them. It is possible to live well in God's world as a people.

The dawn is definitely here. If you're one of God's people here this morning, the dawn is beginning. The light is appearing over the horizon. We belong to the creator God.

We are his. And he delights to give good gifts to his children. Length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you.

You will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man. He will make straight your paths. There will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.

[21 : 17] Your barns will be filled with plenty. And your vats will be bursting with wine. The Lord reproves him whom he loves as a father of the son of whom he delights.

That's just half the story, though, of Proverbs 3. These are God's abundant gifts. And they're received by faith. That's the second part this morning.

God's abundant gifts are received by faith. Each of these little couplets comes in two verses. We've looked at the second half of the couplet. The first half deals with, I guess, the condition, the faith.

There is a link in each of the six sections. So the beginning of verse 2, you have the word for. The beginning of verse 4, you have the word so.

The beginning of verse 6, you have the word and. Verse 8, it will be. In verse 10, then. And verse 12, you have 4.

[22 : 24] So it's linking. This, therefore that. The thing that links us to the blessing is not our own merit or achievement.

It is not that we can somehow impress the Lord. Absolutely not. The central idea is that we rely upon the Lord and not self. It is to trust the Lord, not ourselves.

It's to do things his way, not our own way. In other words, it's faith. We rely on him, not ourselves. Notice the aspects of faith it sets out here.

Verse 1, my son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments. Verse 3, let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you.

Bind them around your neck. Write them on the tablet of your heart. Verse 5, trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding.

- [23 : 25] In all your ways, acknowledge him. Verse 7, be not wise in your own eyes. Fear the Lord and turn away from evil. Verse 9, honor the Lord with your wealth and with the first fruits of all your produce.

Verse 11, my son, do not despise the Lord's discipline. We'll be weary of his reproof. Two key points here regarding faith.

First, we live by faith entirely, exclusively, and exhaustively. That's the focus in verses 1, 3, 5, and 7.

Second, we live by faith in plenty and in pain. That's the focus in verses 9 and 11. So first, we live by faith entirely, exclusively, and exhaustively.

That is the essence of faith. It is the humble acknowledgement that God is the one in charge and not us. It is to submit ourselves to his word and not our own thoughts and ideas.

- [24 : 36] It is to reject sinful self-rule and to welcome his instruction. To gladly do things his way and not our own.

See the emphasis there in verse 1. Do not forget my teaching. Let your heart keep my commandments. There is a deep love for God's word and what he has said.

Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you. Bind them around your neck. Write them on the tablet of your heart. Grasp God's character. Understand who he is.

Let that be bound around your neck. Write them on the tablets of your heart. It is doing things his way, not our own.

And it is about doing. It is about hearing and responding to him. We do need to act in response to what we have heard.

- [25 : 42] Into what we have heard from his word. A failure to act, if you just listen and do nothing. A failure to act will lead to a heart that gets increasingly hard over time.

We must do things his way, not my way. I did it my way cannot be the anthem for the wise.

Frank Sinatra apparently came to loathe his 1969 mega hit, My Way. But it's endured. It's his legacy.

It's one of the most popular songs apparently to be played at funerals. But My Way is an anthem to foolishness. It is a hymn to egocentricity and a total rejection of the creator.

I did it my way. The message of Proverbs 3 is the total opposite. We need to turn our back on our own wisdom, it says. Do not lean on your own understanding.

- [26 : 46] We must turn our back on our own wisdom and not rely on our own thoughts. We need to consciously turn to God and submit to him in all things. See, the world would tell us to follow our own hearts, to be yourself.

And those are, according to the Bible, the worst things you could possibly do. No, we are to live by faith. And as we can see from these verses, it's an all-of-life thing.

It involves all of us. Notice verse 5. Trust in the Lord with all your heart.

Verse 6. In all your ways. Acknowledge him. We are not to be wise in our own eyes, but we are to fear the Lord and turn away from evil.

We are to seek the Lord entirely, exclusively, only him, exhaustively in response to what he's revealed to us. That is what faith is. Faith is not, emphatically not, an irrational belief in something for which there's no proof, as many assume.

- [27 : 59] That's not faith. That's fantasy. By contrast in the Bible, faith is hearing and heeding the revelation of God.

And that's what Proverbs 3 is urging upon us. We've seen that recently in the book of Genesis. That's exactly what Noah did. Three times we read in Genesis that Noah did everything just as God commanded him.

He received clear revelation of God's coming judgment on the world and of the only provision for deliverance through the coming destruction.

He acted on that word. He didn't just sit there thinking that's a nice instruction. He did it. He exhibited what the Bible calls the obedience of faith. He did not forget, but rather kept the commandments of God.

And that is what we see here in Proverbs and in the New Testament. We are to hear and heed the command of God entirely, exclusively, and exhaustively.

[29 : 06] Not partially, not half-heartedly, not hedging our bets alongside Allah and Buddha, but rather wholehearted trust in the Lord.

We are to fear the Lord. That is, as Proverbs, the beginning of wisdom. And to fear the Lord is, as Charles Bridges puts it, an affectionate reverence by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his father's law.

We pay careful attention to what God has revealed to us in the Scriptures. And we then humbly and carefully submit ourselves to it.

We don't fit it to suit us. We don't fit God's word around our worldview. No. We bend ourselves to his will.

We fit our imperfect worldview to his. And that begins with repentance. And it continues with repentance.

[30 : 17] It is trusting him. Submitting to him. Doing things his way. We live by faith entirely. Exclusively and exhaustively.

That's the first thing. Second, we live by faith in plenty and in pain. That's the focus in verses 9 and 11. See, times of plenty and times of pain, those really do test us, don't they?

They test where our confidence really lies. When plenty comes, we tend to think it's deserved. And entirely down to our own wit and wisdom, we forget God.

When pain comes, we feel hard done by. We start to point the finger, seeking someone to blame. We blame God. Abundance and agony tempt us in different ways to curve in upon ourselves.

And Proverbs 3 warns us against that. And urges us to live by faith in times of plenty and in times of pain.

[31 : 27] Rather than honor ourselves, look at verse 9. Rather than honor ourselves, we are told, verse 9, to honor the Lord with our wealth. With the first fruits of all our produce.

So we naturally take credit for wealth. Instead of acknowledging the many factors outside of our control that brought money to us, whatever it is, we attribute it to our own cleverness, our own discipline.

We are perhaps tempted to think, I don't need God. I've got this all figured out. But, we must remember that Jesus himself insisted that we do not feed ourselves any more than the birds or flowers do.

Ultimately, every gift is from him. All good gifts are from the Lord. Everything we enjoy in life is because of him. So humble yourself.

And not acknowledge him when wealth comes. The temptations wealth brings are real. I've seen it. Folk dragged away by love of money.

[32 : 35] And what money can buy? And, when hard times come, we're warned, verse 11. Do not despise the Lord's discipline or to be weary of his reproof.

You see, when pain comes, when difficult times come, we forget that the Lord sees all things perfectly and we see a fraction of reality.

And even what we do see, we see imperfectly. And so, in the midst of trials and hardship, rather than blame God, we are to submit to him and trust him.

That is faith. In plenty or in pain, we are to trust him. And so, at the start of this new year, Proverbs 3 is a passage we do well to meditate upon.

It reminds us of the great and abundant blessings God delights to give to his children. These are real blessings.

[33 : 47] These are real promises. But remember, they are on God's time scale and according to his definition, not ours. But these are real promises.

So we reflect upon that. God delights to give these good things to his children. And Proverbs 3 teaches us that these things come not because we've been good enough, we've earned it.

It's the opposite. These things come by faith. As we submit ourselves to him and trust him. So, at the start of this new year, humble yourselves.

Humble yourselves with obedient faith and enjoy the blessings of God's abundant grace. That's the message of Proverbs 3. Let me pray and then we'll sing our closing hymn.

Father, we thank you that you are indeed a good God. That you are not miserly.

[34 : 52] You are not unkind. But Lord, you are the opposite. You are so gracious and good and generous. And thank you for the reminder in these verses of your abundant gifts or your goodness that you delight to give to your children.

So help us to be a people that don't just listen and walk away. But Lord, help us to be a people who hear and do. That we would respond to what you said this morning by humble trust, with real faith.

So help us to do that. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.