

3. Training in Righteousness

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- [0 : 0 0] Let's bow our heads for a moment of prayer. As Charles Wesley has written and we've just sung, I rest upon your word. The promise is for me.
- My strength and my salvation, Lord, from you alone shall be. And so we ask you, Lord God, to bless us now through your words.
- These words written down thousands of years ago. So bring them to life for us, we pray, and open our hearts to receive them with joy and with a growing understanding.
- And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, let's turn to the book of Proverbs, chapter 3, page 528.
- And I'd like to ask somebody under the age of 20 to complete this biblical quotation.
- [1 : 1 0] You'll be looking for three words. I'll ask for a hand to go up and I'll ask you to speak up. Just three words you're looking for. I'm quoting from the Apostle Paul. All scripture, says Paul, is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and...
- Now, three words. Who knows? Yes. Training in righteousness. Thank you very much. If you'd read your little leaflet for tonight, you'll have seen that that's the title of our talk.
- But anyway, you probably haven't. So well done. Training in righteousness. Training in righteousness. All scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for training in righteousness. Now, what does Paul mean by that little phrase, training in righteousness?
- Imagine you were having a chat with Paul the Apostle in the wind after the evening service tonight as you're drinking with him your barista coffee and you say to him, Paul, brother, apostle, what do you call him?
- I'm not sure. Sir, Paul, I've been thinking about those words that you wrote. All scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for training in righteousness.
- [2 : 1 7] Could I ask what you meant when you wrote training in righteousness? And could I ask as well which parts of the God-breathed scripture I need to turn to for training in righteousness? And the Apostle Paul, very fatherly and loving, would look at you and he would say, what I mean by training in righteousness is learning how to live life God's way.
- And you need to be trained in it because you don't naturally know how to live like that. In fact, by nature, your whole life is geared to ungodliness. So your life needs to be reshaped.
- And scripture, the Old Testament scripture, will take the putty of your life and will remold it. In fact, will remold it so much that in twenty years' time you will not be recognised for the person that you are today.
- And if you ask me which parts of scripture are most useful to give training in righteousness, I would say that the foremost book in the Old Testament is the book of Proverbs. If you read the book of Proverbs and take it seriously and learn it and practice it, you will receive training in righteousness.
- Well, so much for the imagined advice of the Apostle Paul. We know that Paul preached the gospel about Jesus from the law and the prophets. We learn that from the Acts of the Apostles.

[3 : 40] But his training in righteousness, Paul's instruction in godly living, he would have looked to the book of Proverbs very much as well. Now this evening, I want to take chapter 3, verses 1 to 8.

And I should just say that I'm not intending in this series on Proverbs to try to work my way through the whole of the book. That would be biting off much more than we could chew. So I'm going to be really quite selective.

Better to have half a loaf than a loaf so big it makes you choke. So we'll look at this first section of chapter 3 under the title Training in Righteousness.

Three important lessons. Three important lessons. Training in righteousness. So here's the first. Godliness involves storing up the Lord's teaching.

Let me read the first two verses again. 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.

[4 : 40] Now just look at verse 1. It's an intriguing verse because of the way it paints a picture here of an aging father with his young son. My son, do not forget my teaching.

Why should the father put it like that? My son, do not forget my teaching. Well presumably because he knows that his son will forget it if the son is given half a chance. There is something about this son's young heart that doesn't want to engage with his father's instruction.

You can imagine the father having a conversation with his boy one day and saying to him after lunch, perhaps on a Saturday, Son, come with me into the sitting room and sit down after lunch and I'll teach you a bit about the godly life.

But Dad, Dad, look, the sun's shining and I can see my friends out there in the park and they've got a football with them. Couldn't I go out and play with them? In a few minutes, son, you can, but sit down with me just now.

Okay, Dad, okay, Dad. But Dad, have you forgotten? It's 2010. 2010. I mean, the world is so different now from the way it was when you were a teenager.

[5 : 48] I mean, you played your football with Shem, Ham and Japheth, didn't you? Or at least with Queen Victoria. I mean, whoever it was, it was a long time ago. There's always going to be something in the young heart and often in older hearts as well that wants to forget the Lord's teaching, that doesn't really want to engage with it.

Just look at the first verse again. Imagine it was rephrased like this. My son, since you are begging me morning and night to teach you the scriptures, I've worked out a program that will give us at least two hours today and every day together, every day of the week.

No, it's not like that, is it? The verse is angled in the direction of a son whose thoughts are naturally elsewhere. The father knows that his son's heart has to be worked on.

So the father patiently and lovingly perseveres with his teaching, gently insisting that the son grasp the teaching, storing it up in his heart, as the next phrase of verse 1 puts it.

So friends, let's allow verse 1 here to remind us that although our hearts are sometimes reluctant to remember and keep the Lord's teaching, there's actually nothing that we need more in life than to remember and keep his instruction.

[7 : 09] And where, according to verse 1, where are the Lord's commandments to be kept? In our heads? In our church buildings? In the books on our shelves?

No, in our hearts. When our hearts begin to keep his teaching, our lives really begin to be changed from inside to out. And notice the great incentive that is given to us in verse 2.

When our hearts begin to keep the Lord's commandments, length of days and years of life and peace will be added to us. Now, that raises questions and I want to return to that promise in just a moment.

But let me first point out something about the way that Solomon writes here. Very often, he gives an instruction and immediately he follows it with a promise which acts as a kind of incentive.

So just looking down through these few verses, you'll see that verse 1 is an instruction and verse 2 is a promise or incentive. Verse 3 is an instruction and verse 4 is a promise.

[8 : 16] Verse 5 is instruction and so is the first half of verse 6 and then the second half of verse 6 is a promise. Then verse 7 is instruction and verse 8 is a promise.

Verse 9 is instruction and verse 10 is a promise. So do you see the pattern here? Follow this instruction and you will be blessed in a particular way.

So what God is doing through this pattern of writing is reminding us that our obedience to his commands will be met by his blessing. It's an incentive to us.

He's telling us that the godly life brings happiness and blessings in its train. Now a certain note of caution does need to be sounded here. We're not intended to read these blessings as if they were cast iron promises that will be kept in every individual case.

Just look at verses 1 and 2 as a good example. We've all known of very devoted, very godly Christian people who have died prematurely long before reaching old age.

[9 : 26] Or look at verses 9 and 10. We've all known of very godly Christians who have been very generous with their wealth and yet as they've reached the end of their life they've had hardly two brown pennies to rub together.

If we take these promises as cast iron guarantees for us in every case we will come unstuck. That's not the way we're meant to read them. They are general principles. They speak of the way in which things will tend to work out.

So going back to verses 1 and 2 the message is that the godly person who remembers the Lord's teaching and stores it up in their heart will usually live a long life and a peaceful one.

The godly life will tend to longevity and peacefulness. We haven't got to be geniuses to see why that is. If a person is living under the Lord's instruction that person will be seeking to love his neighbour rather than bully or cheat his neighbour he'll be honest and fair in his business dealings he'll be gentle and peaceable in his manners and speech.

It's the one who rejects the Lord's teaching who will become violent or a cheat and who will forfeit people's trust and affection. And that's the person who will be robbed of peace robbed of serenity.

[10 : 43] Ill-gotten gain is no recipe for a good night's sleep. We undo the threads of our own life if we reject the Lord's teaching. We begin to fall apart if we reject the Lord's teaching.

So verse 2 is there to encourage us. It's not a cast iron guarantee that we shall live to the age of 95 but it does assure us that a peaceful life stretches before us once we have decided to keep the Lord's commandments in our hearts.

So there's the first thing. Godliness involves storing up the Lord's teaching in our hearts. So let's ask the Lord to give us hearts that are hungry for more and more of his instruction.

Now second, godliness involves learning to be loving and loyal. Here are verses 3 and 4 again and let's notice the instruction of verse 3 followed by the incentive or the assurance of verse 4.

Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you. Bind them around your neck. Write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favour and good success in the sight of God and man.

[11 : 58] Now verse 1 involved the memory. Do not forget. And the heart. Verse 3 is a little bit different. This time we have our necks involved.

Our necks with a close-fitting necklace. And again our hearts. Though this time it's as though the heart is a tablet on which to write things. A kind of jotter in which you make entries in indelible ink.

But the purpose of bind them around your neck and write them on the tablet of your heart is just a colourful way of saying that as we're trained in righteousness the qualities of steadfast love and faithfulness or you might say enduring love and loyalty will become deeply part of our personalities and our character.

Now you'll have spotted I'm sure that those qualities of steadfast love and faithfulness are characteristics of God himself first and foremost. In fact steadfast love in the Old Testament is the supreme mark of God's covenant.

The great promise or series of promises that God gave to Abraham to Isaac and Jacob and then kept on restating and re-emphasizing throughout Old Testament history.

[13 : 13] In the covenant God says to his people I am yours and you are mine and I will always be yours and you will always be mine.

I will never leave you nor forsake you therefore you can always trust me. Now that's the character of God's steadfast love utterly loyal utterly committed to his people and our eternal welfare.

And the extraordinary thing almost unbelievable thing is that as we get to know our God better we begin to show the same characteristics. We begin to grow into people who are unshiftingly loyal and loving to our friends to our fellow church members to our spouses to our relatives our parents and children our colleagues at work.

It is extraordinary how the Lord is willing to take an unreliable little weasel and turn him or her into an intensely loyal rock steady person who can be really trusted.

I don't mean to say that we become perfect in this respect certainly not we all have blips. all of us are a work in progress but the Lord is at work to change us deeply and he will refashion us into loving faithful loyal people.

[14 : 37] Now look at Solomon's instruction there in verse 3 what he's saying to his son is be like this my son work at developing these qualities if you're short of steadfast love and loyalty work to build them up don't let them forsake you don't be an unreliable weasel and look at the incentive there in verse 4 the steadfastly loving and loyal person will find favour and good success in the sight of God and man of course that's true if we grow into reliable rock steady people other people will trust us and respect us now the question is of course how do we grow how do we grow into that sort of person how does the unreliable weasel that we all are by nature grow into a person who is steadfastly loving and loyal now that must have been the question in the mind of Solomon's young son as he sat that afternoon with his father looking out into the park at his friends playing football he would have said to himself how can an unreliable 17 year old like me grow into somebody who is steadfastly loving and loyal

I can see that it's a desirable thing to do but how is it going to happen to me or to earth this in the present moment here in St. George's Tron on the 7th of November 2010 if you're a young person or a youngish person and you don't feel that your character at the moment is yet very steadfast or loyal just look at the older Christians here in this building older Christians that you recognise are steadfast loyal people are people who can be deeply trusted just have a look around move those eyes around if you're a young person look around at the older ones I want you to fix your beady eye on somebody some older person that you know is trustworthy have you done that?

now just imagine that person that you're looking at when he or she was 17 because he or she was 17 once so have you done that? every older Christian was once a 17 year old full of all the same unsteadiness and confusion of a 21st century teenager so the question is how did that unsteady youngster of 1950 or 1960 grow up over the decades into the steady loyal older person that you're now looking at and thinking about the answer is by often thinking about the steadfast love and loyalty of the Lord and gradually learning to imitate it as we think deeply about how steadfastly the Lord has loved us as we come to understand how determined Jesus was to go to the cross and complete the work that had been given to him to do how he refused to shirk it he refused to twist and turn and duck his responsibility and as we come to see that it was love for us steadfast love for us that kept him to his task then we come to realise that that is the only way to live life ourselves

Jesus has demonstrated steadfast love and loyalty more than any other human being ever did or ever could now we shall never be able to live up to his example fully ourselves of course not we're frail and sinful but Jesus has modelled steadfast love and faithfulness and loyalty for us and as we gaze at his love and his loyalty our own will gradually develop so we shall become people whose word can be trusted whose friendship can be relied on whose marriage vows are gladly kept whose commitment to love and serve the Lord is ongoing and lifelong a trustworthy saviour makes for a trustworthy Christian and as that Christian looks long and hard and often at the steadfast love and loyalty of Jesus Christ so that those same characteristics will grow in our hearts so there's our second thing godliness involves learning to be loving and loyal steadfastly loving and loyal and of course that will lead to favour in the sight of God and man as verse 4 puts it well now third godliness involves replacing trust in self with trust in the

Lord it involves replacing trust in self with trust in the Lord I want to take verses 5 to 8 now as a unit but really I want to concentrate mostly on verses 5 and 6 now remember Solomon's typical way of writing instruction first followed by promise well in verses 5 to 8 there are two promises the first is there in the second half of verse 6 he will make straight your paths and the second is there in verse 8 it will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones now those are great and desirable promises aren't they our life becoming straight and clear our pathway before us clear and easy to follow rather than devious and crooked and also the promise of refreshment and vigour to our flesh and even to our very bones just to pause for a moment on verse 8 I wonder if you noticed the footnote to verse 8 which says that the Hebrew word translated flesh is actually the word for navel it will be healing to your navel and refreshment to your bones now your navel of course has nothing to do with the royal navy it's your belly button isn't it it's a very odd phrase healing to your belly button have you ever had belly button problems

[20 : 53] I've had lots of things wrong with different parts of my body I'll tell you some of them wouldn't you like to know I've had for example ear ache neck ache belly ache heart ache back ache and headache but I have never suffered from belly button itis personally and my guess is that maybe you haven't either so why should Solomon say healing to your navel well my very learned commentary on proverbs says that Solomon is using the navel to represent the whole body my commentary says that the navel is here's a latin phrase pars prototo pars p-a-r-s pars prototo a part representing the whole so that somehow the navel stands for the whole body and that's why our translation speaks of healing to your flesh or to your whole body well I guess my commentary must be right about that but if there is anyone here tonight with a pain in the belly button then I recommend verse 8 particularly to you right friends back to the serious work let's look at verse 5 verse 5 verse 5 is about trusting the

Lord but the power of verse 5 really comes in the second half of the verse trust in the Lord with all your heart that's the first half of the verse and taken simply by itself it sounds very sweet and gentle and sunshiny as if we were being invited almost to a dinner party or perhaps a picnic on the beach trust in the Lord with all your heart well of course who would ever dream of doing anything else however it's the second half of the verse that shows us precisely what we might dream of doing if we were left to our own devices our natural position is not to trust in the Lord but rather to lean on our own understanding if you like to be self reliant now the way of the world will always be to teach and practice self reliance if you were to ask the boards of governors in our

Glasgow schools what their underlying philosophy of education was I'm sure they would initially bring out the stock phrases about helping your sons and daughters to realise their full potential helping your sons and daughters to become successful citizens who make a significant contribution to our society school speech days are full of that kind of thing you go to a school speech day and that's what the speeches are all about but underneath those familiar phrases is the commitment of the modern school to develop in its pupils a resilient sense of self-reliance and independence when you pick up the school magazines and you read various articles about the performance and track record of recent old boys and old girls at the school the former pupils who are really praised and highlighted tend to be those who have displayed tough-minded self-reliance men and women who have leaned heavily on their own understanding and somehow have survived the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune let me read you a few famous lines of poetry in praise of self-reliance from the pen of the

American poet W.E. Henley out of the night that covers me black as the pit from pole to pole I thank whatever gods may be for my unconquerable soul it matters not how straight the gate how charged with punishments the scroll I am the master of my fate I am the captain of my soul those lines express the very essence of humanity in revolt against God I am the captain of my soul that's Adam and Eve isn't it as they ate the forbidden fruit in the garden we will lean on our own understanding thank you very much we will not trust the Lord with all our heart we will not fear him or obey him we will now become the masters of our own fate answerable only to ourselves the captains of our own soul now somebody might want to raise this question if the Bible is teaching us to say no to self reliance and independence of thought aren't we going to end up as weaklings people who are as limp as a lettuce leaf won't we turn into people who lack spine and energy and everything that makes a man a man and a woman a woman well just think of those men and women in the Bible who trusted the Lord most did they lack courage and energy and determination far from it it was because they trusted and feared the Lord that they were able to stand firm in the face of fierce opposition it was their trust in the

Lord that made them strong people think for example of the prophet Jeremiah he was a man so strong and immovable that he was able to resist the whole of the Jewish nation his own people because he trusted the Lord in Jeremiah's day Jerusalem was being threatened by the Babylonians and they came against Jerusalem with a huge army and besieged it and many of the Hebrews filled with nationalistic fervor said we must resist the Babylonians to the death but Jeremiah said no we must surrender to them that's the word of the Lord and the other Jews hated him for speaking like that because to them he was a traitor but he had the strength to resist the whole nation now what does Jeremiah himself say about trusting the Lord he says this in chapter 17 of his prophecy cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength whose heart turns away from the

[27 : 03] Lord but blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord whose trust is the Lord so to return to Proverbs chapter 3 verse 5 the source of real strength and life is to turn away from our self-made wisdom and to trust in the Lord with all our heart and trusting in the Lord means so much more than trusting him to provide for our needs our need of food and shelter and family and friends and that kind of thing it's much more it's something much more radical than trusting him for those things what it means is deliberately rejecting our own wisdom deliberately throttling and putting to death our store of self-created know-how and understanding and presenting our minds as it were to the Lord God afresh as if they were the minds of an ignorant and helpless baby and saying to the Lord please Lord remake refashion the whole of my mental apparatus my whole training so far has been a training in independence and self-reliance take my mind empty it of all that nonsense and refit it and refill it with your values with your world view with your understanding of the meaning of life and death and salvation and everything else

I'm going to be your person from now on I'm going to trust that your view of the world which so deeply contradicts the world's view of the world is the right view make your view my view Lord renew my mind now that's what it means to trust in the Lord with all your heart and to reject your own self-made understanding the agnostic the man of the world will hate the teaching of verse 5 he will see it as the demise of human independence which is indeed what it is but in truth verse 5 is where real human strength begins to push God out of our lives and to rely upon ourselves is fatal the de-godding of God is the unmaning of man to reject God as the one we trust in is to sign the death warrant of our own humanity it's such a paradox but the fact is that the more we rely upon ourselves the less human we become our very humanity shrivels up as we turn our capacity to trust in upon ourselves our humanity can only flourish and grow as we learn to trust in the

Lord with all our heart and verse 6 helps us to see this even more clearly look with me at the first half of verse 6 in all your ways acknowledge him now I want to ask a question not to be answered out loud this time but I want to ask a question about that first half of verse 6 for everybody to think about quietly for a moment we have six words there in all your ways acknowledge him now which do you think of those six words is the one that makes the difference between the happy Christian life and a miserable Christian life don't you think it's the word all in all your ways acknowledge him in other words in every department of your life make sure that he is acknowledged as Lord and obeyed as Lord the first half of verse 6 gives us the key to a happy

Christian life now it takes time for all of us to learn how to acknowledge him in all our ways just to give an example from my own life I still have a pang in my stomach as I remember an incident which happened when I was I think 19 I was a student at the time and I was beginning to make some progress as a young Christian I used to go regularly to a scripture union camp in the south of England and by the time I was 19 was a very junior and very inexperienced assistant leader now the senior leader in fact he was retired by this stage but the senior leader of this particular camp was quite an old man he was 70 plus but he was very perceptive and he understood the hearts of young people remarkably clearly now it happened that he only lived about 20 or 30 miles from where my family and I lived so one day in the summer holidays I hopped in a car and I went across to see him and have tea with him by his invitation and he had a small privet hedge in his garden at the back and because he was getting on in years and not very strong he gave me a pair of shears after we had our bread and butter and jammy dodgers and so on and he asked if I would clip the hedge for him it was a little hedge it was barely a 20 minute job but when

I was about half way through clipping the hedge he popped out of the back kitchen and he came up to me and he said to me without any preamble Edward are you really going flat out for the Lord now that was his question are you really going flat out for the Lord now and I said yes but it wasn't quite the truth the truth was that I was not acknowledging the Lord in all my ways some of them yes I was going to church I was reading my Bible a bit I was going to the University Christian Union I was one of the crowd of Christian boys and girls but I still had a somewhat divided heart I hadn't yet quite seen that the key for the happy Christian life was to acknowledge the Lordship of the Lord in every part of my life now all of us need to see this the word all is the key word in all your ways acknowledge him in every part of life now what do our lives consist of what are the main parts the main component parts of our lives for younger people school college for older people for all of us work money and how we use it family life for some of us marriage then there are friendships relationships with the opposite sex leisure time hobbies sport music and the kaleidoscopic multifaceted life that goes on inside our heads every day the tens of thousands of thoughts that we have every day our hopes our dreams our imaginations our ambitions our fears our joys our sorrows our glad moments and our sufferings in all your ways acknowledge him the miserable

[34 : 08] Christian is more miserable than the miserable non-Christian the non-Christian organises his life along certain lines and principles and develops his own ways of going about things without God but the miserable Christian is divided and that's why he feels sad and confused and guilty to acknowledge the Lord in some things but not in all things is a sure recipe for unhappiness and ongoing immaturity in the Christian life but just look at the promise there in the second half of verse six in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths now that's not a promise that will be exempted from suffering but it is a promise that will be able to walk the road of life with the Lord in a happy straightforward uncomplicated way verses five and six lie right at the heart of Old Testament training in righteousness they're massively important verses in fact if our nation learned and practiced just those two verses there would be hardly any work for psychiatrists and counsellors to do from John O'Groats to Land's End those two verses and verses seven and eight with them are basic instruction in how to be blessed by the kindness of God well says Solomon have you got all that my boy have you listened run out and enjoy your football and when you come in we'll have buttered crumpets and a slice of chocolate cake let us pray 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 how we thank you dear father for the wisdom of Solomon in these two great verses and we pray that you'll take the truth of this and write it deep in our hearts we long to learn how to acknowledge you in all our ways how to trust you with all our heart and not to lean on our own understanding as the world would seek to teach us so help us our gracious God to learn these things and to learn therefore the happy and fruitful Christian life and we pray that you'll make our path straight before us and that our lives therefore should draw many others to the Lord Jesus and in his name we ask it Amenä you you you you you you